MARTHA THE SEVENTH

JANE ABBOTT

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MARTHA THE SEVENTH

BY

JANE ABBOTT

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"BARBERRY GATE", "JULIET IS TWENTY", ETC.

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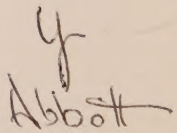

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MARTHA THE SEVENTH

CHAPTER I

A PRAYER MEETING

"WEDNESDAY night, folks," said father, pushing his chair back from the table. Father said that every Wednesday night. It meant: "Get ready for prayer meeting." And everyone always got ready with a pleasant bustle.

Martha Bradshaw usually enjoyed going to prayer meeting. She found a satisfying spiritual uplift in its service and a vicarious enjoyment in its social contacts. Usually she was the first to fly upstairs to put on her second best dress and smooth her hair.

But to-night was different. A tragedy had taken place.

Flossie's kittens were gone. She and Flossie had searched everywhere for them. Then she had sought out Jerry, the hired man, and learned the truth from him. He had drowned them. But he hadn't wanted to. "The old lady" had told him he had to do it. The old lady was Aunt Judith.

Those kittens had not bothered anyone except Flossie. They were good kittens. Martha had fixed a box for them in the wood-shed and they left it only to play in the sun outside of the wood-shed door. Martha herself, several times a day, had carried a saucer of

milk to the box to augment Flossie's supply; if Aunt Judith repeatedly stepped in the saucer it was Aunt Judith's fault and not the kittens'.

"Never you mind, Marty, the old cat'll have more," Jerry had told her, in a kindly endeavor to console her. But she had turned from him in white anger. Of course Flossie might have more but they wouldn't be the same as these beautiful kittens—two coal black, one a calico, and the others silky gray like the mother. They had had round little blue eyes. Martha could see them by just shutting her own.

The kittens were irretrievably drowned. Dyett's Pond was deep. Martha had to tell the mother. She had carried her to her room, which was her own room, now that Rachel had moved into Molly's room, and there she had given vent to her feelings, with her face against Flossie's furry breast.

"They were my kittens, too," she wailed. "Yours and mine. Aunt Judith did it. She hadn't any right to do it without saying a word—without asking us."

All through supper Martha had burned with her sense of injury. She had carefully avoided looking at Aunt Judith at the end of the table. She had a feeling that if she looked she would find Aunt Judith changed into something horrid, simply by the enormity of her injustice. She ought to be so transformed as a punishment.

"I'll get even with her," Martha had thought, gulping down Amandy Meegs' good meat pie without any appreciation of how good it was.

With her heart so full of a longing for avengement Martha could scarcely put it into going to prayer meeting. The Bradshaws always walked the half-mile from Twin Farms to the village, for Amariah Bradshaw held it shiftless not to use the legs the good Lord gave one and stood firmly against Rachel's hint that if they'd drive they'd save time and that maybe it was as wicked to waste time as legs. Ordinarily Martha enjoyed this formal procession of the Bradshaws to church. Blair liked to say that they looked like the animals, walking two by two, but Martha did not think so. She always felt impressive. She always was glad when they met the Carters, who were of French-Canadian stock, or old Sandy Anderson, who, Amandy said, was a heathen, or the good-for-nothing Newberry girls, who had not lived long in Greenbury and who did not do much else than get themselves talked about. She felt that these must be deeply impressed by the sight of the Bradshaws going to meeting. It had been even more impressive before Joan and Molly were married and when Roger and Dick were home but even now they made what Blair called a "big dust." Father always walked alone at the head. Blair called him Moses sometimes but Martha always reproved him when he was facetious about father going to church. She thought father looked grander than the President of the United States in his frock coat and broad brimmed hat which he wore only on Sundays and Wednesdays and at funerals and on election days. Aunt Judith and Rachel followed father, and she and Blair brought up the rear. Some-

times Amandy and Jerry went, too, but Martha was glad when they did not go for Jerry looked so red in the face when he wore a white collar and Amandy had a disconcerting way of watching to see if the neighbors were peeking out around curtains at them. But to-night Martha fell into her place beside Blair sullenly. She walked with her eyes on the ground. She did not even see her best chum, Nelly Howe, pass with her father in her father's new Ford, nor Rachel wave to Conger Smith, dropping back a step behind Aunt Judith to do so. She kept thinking about the kittens and Aunt Judith and how she'd get even.

She wedged herself against the hard corner of the pew in her effort to hold herself aloof from everything in general and her unfeeling family in particular. She did not even notice that Conger Smith was at meeting. She and Nelly Howe had a pleasant practice of watching to see who went home with whom from meeting and exchanging their observations the next day at school. Poor Rachel always had to go home the way she came, for father held that meeting was no place for "carrying-on" and Martha and Nelly Howe sympathized deeply with Rachel on that account, for they had decided Rachel was "sweet" on Conger Smith and would have liked to walk home with him. Martha had caught Rachel's eyes flashing toward the corner where Conger Smith sat, when he came to prayer meeting, and she had observed also that when Conger Smith was there Rachel sang the hymns very loudly, and that when he wasn't there she moved her lips only enough to

make father think she was singing. Now when Blair nudged her and whispered: "Look! Con Smith's got grease on his hair," she did not even turn her head.

Prayer and invocation proceeded but Martha's ears were deaf to them. At that precise moment her soul was as far from the salvation Deacon Saunders was lustily acclaiming as a fifteen-year-old soul could be. Anyway, if the Deacon's salvaged hosts were to include Aunt Judith she did not want to be numbered with them.

Long ago Martha had constructed a religious ecstasy of her own that invariably proved more pleasant than trying to follow Deacon Saunders, or any of the visiting preachers who came to Greenbury. She never could be quite sure what they meant, so she had learned to worship in her own way. When she was very small, she had figured that probably God came into the church through the square of window over the Bradshaw pew. It was nearer heaven than the door. She had watched that window, thinking maybe to see God come in. It was a dusty window and sometimes cobwebs swung from its casings. The casings perpetually needed painting. But Martha had never minded that or the cobwebs. She saw only the elm bough sketched in a shifting tracery against the panes, the patch of sky beyond that sometimes was blue and sometimes like black velvet studded with diamonds and sometimes no color at all but like smoke and sometimes pinky white, like the white of a wild rose. After she knew that God did not come in through the window she came to think

that she could lift up a part of her that had nothing to do with her coat or dress out past the elm boughs, past that square of sky, to God's throne where she could kneel in worship before the Heavenly Father. Sometimes she stared so hard at the dusty window that she could feel herself lifting up and up to that golden throne, little Martha Bradshaw, there at the feet of the Great Father, close to His Love, while these others knelt on hard stools and mumbled Amens and tried to follow the rambling prayers and testimonials. Once she had attempted to explain her own particular worship to Rachel with some idea of sharing it with her sister, but Rachel had laughed at her and called her "crazy" and she never had tried again. She did not think Rachel went to meeting to pray, anyway; Rachel was always slyly peeping about the room or yawning into the crook of her elbow.

To-night a bird perched on the elm bough beyond the square of window but Martha did not see it for she did not lift her eyes to the window once. She did not think of God once. She just thought of Aunt Judith and getting even.

She looked at Aunt Judith, sitting beside father, her fingers in their black prayer-meeting gloves gripping the covers of the hymn book. How could she sing and pray, Martha asked herself furiously, when she had told Jerry to drown her kittens, told him without saying one word to her, the rightful owner of the beautiful litter. That Aunt Judith could so sing and

pray, looking very straight and righteous and proper in her black dress, made Martha the more angry.

Until now Martha had been fond of Aunt Judith. Aunt Judith had given her the only mothering she had had, and if it had been an Aunt Judith sort it was none the less a mothering. It had answered all Martha's physical and moral needs to date; that it may have lacked something of infinite sweetness and understanding, Martha did not appreciate. Along with telling Martha that she was as stubborn as a mule and a spoiled young one, and as like her father as two peas, Aunt Judith lost no opportunity to impress upon Martha that no one could say she wasn't doing her duty by her brother's children and especially by Martha, left a motherless babe-in-arms, and Martha, at fifteen, was enough of a Bradshaw to give due credit to anyone who did her duty. But all that was before the drowning of Flossie's kittens. Now Aunt Judith had to take her place with those who must be punished.

A hymn began. The organ wheezed. Rachel's clear alto blended with Blair's uncertain voice. Down at his end father boomed a mighty bass. Outside the window the bird swayed on the elm bough. And Martha stood, stiff, apart, her brow twisted into little knots over her downcast eyes, her soul heavy with its problem of avengement. For a fifteen-year-old girl could not know many instruments of avengement, especially a fifteen-year-old girl who had lived all her days in the heady air of the Vermont hills, whose face was perpetually spattered with freckles and whose nose

tilted upward in spite of frequent applications of the mud plaster recommended by Nelly Howe. In her first brooding Martha had wanted only to "get even," a retaliation that would not of course bring back the kittens but that would sweeten the rancor in her own heart; now she was convinced that Aunt Judith must be punished, must be shown that she could not outrage the inviolable rights of even the youngest of the Bradshaws, such rights as owning kittens. Aunt Judith must have a "sign" that would teach her not to offend again.

Martha had grown up with "signs." She knew all about them from Amandy Meegs and respected them as Amandy did. Amandy claimed to have had them herself. She'd had one when her second cousin had been hit by a train at a crossing and again when Freeman Miles' deaf and dumb boy fell into the well. She had told Martha about having them and Martha had been deeply impressed. Amandy lived by her "signs." She did her work by them, and sometimes did not do it—when the "signs" were against the work. She read almanacs and took off her flannels by the changes of the moon. Amandy believed in people being struck by lightning as a "sign" and seeing pillars of fire. Martha wished that she had told Amandy what Aunt Judith had done; Amandy, from her long experience, could have thought of just the right "sign" to bring down upon Aunt Judith, now.

Suddenly thinking of Amandy Meegs' "signs" made Martha think of something Amandy had told her

long ago, something she had forgotten until this moment. Amandy had told her that "likely as not" she, Martha Bradshaw, would grow up to have a power like witches—for wasn't she the seventh child and wasn't her pa a seventh child before her? And a seventh child of a seventh child—Amandy had rolled her eyes in a way that had made Martha shiver with expectancy, had made her think she felt a little bit of the "power" within her, like a prick of stomach ache after eating green apples. Even Aunt Judith had said more than once, usually after some misdoing, that one could expect anything from a seventh child. Martha had taken such cryptic comments as a part of Aunt Judith's sort of mothering until Amandy had told her she might have a power like witches. She had begged Amandy to tell her more, but Amandy had refused to say another word and had bade her, in a carefully lowered voice, not to so much as breathe a syllable of what she'd said. "If you do, I'll witch you, sure enough." Not being able to talk about it had made Martha forget it, and anyway, she was far too normal and busy a little girl to want ever to be like a witch.

But now, because her soul was steeped with dark brooding, Amandy's "likely as not" came back to her with sinister meaning. Maybe she had the power to invoke this "sign" she sought. She stiffened and held her breath in order to summon to her that inner strength. She shivered. It was frightening to think of it. But she must do it. She must bring retribution

down upon Aunt Judith's head, a retribution that would punish her.

The hymn had ended and Deacon Saunders was inviting his brethren to join him in prayer. She must hurry. She knelt with the others but her whole mind and body were intent upon what she had to do. She imagined she began to feel queer inside. The power was working.

Because she was on her knees her lips began to form a prayer. And because she was in meeting she addressed the prayer to God. "Dear God, Aunt Judith must be punished. She killed my kittens. She did not even ask me if she could. Send her a sign." Here she stopped, in a quandary. She didn't know what kind of a sign would be best. If only she had talked to Amandy Meegs! Blair leaned close to her and tickled her, but she paid no heed to him. She must finish quickly this business of avengement. "Please make Aunt Judith know——" She floundered. And Deacon Saunders was beginning his series of Amens. They rumbled sonorously. She must hurry. Meeting would be over in a minute. "Take Aunt Judith away——" But that seemed terrible. God might think she meant to Heaven and she didn't. She didn't mean for very long; just for a while. She was seized with panic. Oh, she must hurry. "Just long enough for a sign——" She had no time to say more and she had to say that so fast that she could not feel sure God had heard her. The congregation were getting to their feet. Blair was

nudging her. Rachel's head was turning toward the door.

Martha got up a little unsteadily. She felt queer enough now to satisfy her that her power had functioned. As she followed her family out into the aisle she wobbled, just as she had when she tried to walk after the measles. She did not look at anyone, but kept a little behind father and Aunt Judith and very close to Blair. Suddenly all her anger had left her and left her spent and cold.

Outside the door she drew a long breath. Everything looked the same. She had expected everything would look different. Aunt Judith showed no consciousness of anything about to happen to her. She was talking with Miss Prowett and Deacon Saunders' wife about putting down eggs in water glass—she was going to begin putting them down right away. The hens at Twin Farms were laying better. Father was shaking hands with everyone around. He always shook hands with everyone after prayer meeting as though he had not seen them for a long time. Rachel was out on the sidewalk, the centre of a gay little group. Conger Smith was one of it. Blair had darted off into the grass and was returning with something in his hand that Martha knew was a baby frog and intended to scare her. Oh, everything was as it was every Wednesday night she could remember, as it would be for all the Wednesday nights to come, she hoped fervently. She was glad it was so. She began to feel a little ashamed of that angry girl she had been, even to hope

that the sign she had invoked might fail of fulfillment. Perhaps she only had imagined that pricking of an inner power.

On the homeward way she chattered and laughed with Blair, let him put the frog on her shoulder very close to her neck, and did not even squeal. She hulloed to Nelly Howe, homeward bound on the brand new wheels. To reassure herself the more that she was simply Martha Bradshaw, going home from her prayer meeting, and no one possessed of supernatural power, she slipped her hand through Blair's arm and clung to it as she walked by his side.

Amandy Meegs met them at the gate.

"There's a telegram. A tel-e-gram." She fairly shouted it. She was greatly excited. And so was father, at once. So was Aunt Judith. So was Rachel.

"A telegram?" Father repeated after Amandy, and so did Aunt Judith and Rachel. Rachel added: "Maybe something's happened to one of the girls. Or Dick. Or Roger." Her voice was shrill with alarm as she said it. Telegrams came rarely to Greenbury and usually meant something happening that was not pleasant.

"It's for Mis' Judith," Amandy cried. She turned and led them up the walk. "It come ten minutes ago. Peters' boy brung it."

"For Aunt Judith!" It was Martha who cried this. But no one noticed her. Father took Aunt Judith's arm and led her into the house and the others pressed on their heels.

"It's in the kitchen. On the table." Amandy ex-

plained, still leading them. In the kitchen she ran to a shelf, seized the lamp she had left there, turned up its wick, and set it on the table beside the yellow envelope. "There!" she declared, pointing a bony finger at the missive. And she rolled her eyes.

It was father who opened the envelope. Aunt Judith told him to open it, with a nod of her head. Her hands were trembling in the black gloves she had not yet taken off.

"Come at once. Charlie fell off the roof. We need you."

Of them all it was Martha who cried out first. And a terror in her voice brought them all wheeling on her in wonder. Amandy promptly voiced comfort. "It's just the shock. Telegrams is always a shock. Don't you be scared, honey, it ain't any of yours fell off." Then Amandy had to give heed to Aunt Judith, standing with the yellow sheet in her black-gloved fingers.

"Humph!" Aunt Judith did not cry it—she grunted it. "If that isn't Charlie Pickering's wife all over. Get him flat on his back and she wants me. Well, I might as well go. Maybe he's broken every bone in his body. If you'll hitch up the horse, Amariah, I can catch the eleven-ten over at the Junction. Rachel, don't stand there and stare at me. Put over an iron and press out my challie. Amandy Meegs, get my summer underwear out of the chest in the attic. And I might as well take my spring percale. Goodness knows how long I'll stay. I'll stay as long as they need me. Charlie Pickering's wife isn't going to have

a chance to say I didn't do my duty by him, even if he is a stepson and an ungrateful one at that. I'll pack the telescope, and if I need more things, you can send them down to me. He might have waited until I got those eggs set! Like as not, Amandy, you'll pick out all the bad ones to do. Martha, you'll have to finish sewing that lace edge on your petticoat yourself. Amariah, have you any money in the safe?"

Like a general Aunt Judith commanded every angle of the situation. They all flew about her bidding, except Martha. She stood still, close to the table upon which Aunt Judith had dropped the telegram. She was trembling violently. A terror that was nauseating was sweeping over her.

Aunt Judith—going—away. Her sign had come! And she had not wanted it to come, after all. She did not want to have power like witches.

She flung her arm up and across her face and fled to her room where she threw herself upon her bed.

CHAPTER II

MARTHA MAKES A "PROMISE"

MARTHA had heard her father drive into the barn. That meant that Aunt Judith really had gone.

She had not known when she had fallen asleep. It might have been at once, it might not have been for hours, for her dreams so followed her tormented thoughts that they seemed one and the same. And her waking had found her headachy as Amandy always was after she had had one of her "bad nights."

When father called "Marty" outside her door she dragged herself out of bed. Father called them each morning, thumping from door to door in his heavy boots and calling "Rachel," "Blair," "Marty" in turn. His big, hearty voice was like the morning itself. He himself breakfasted early, so after his round he always thumped on out to the barn and left Aunt Judith to see that the sleepyheads obeyed his summons.

It was a morning to gladden the heart of anyone. The sun was peeping up over the barn roofs straight into Martha's windows. In the black cherry tree that brushed her sill the robins were madly fussing over various housekeeping controversies. A spice of the spring pervaded everything except Martha's soul.

She crossed the little room and stared at her reflection in the square mirror over her bureau. She felt a queer surprise and a tiny bit of relief that she saw the

same Martha staring at her from the glass. Somehow it had seemed to her that a Martha who possessed inner power must *look* different! But there was the same straight black hair arching upward from the little widow's peak over her freckled forehead, the same turned-up nose and the pointed chin. There were not even red stains on her cheeks as there had been the time she had tonsillitis, yet she felt now more squeamy inside than she had then.

She sighed as she began the process of dressing. Ordinarily this took the briefest time imaginable, but this morning Martha moved slowly, held by a strong reluctance to face her family, Blair especially. Between her and Blair there would always be now this secret, for secret it must remain. She vowed this. She might have told Blair about the kittens and even how she had wished that Aunt Judith would be punished in *some* way, but she could not tell him about the sign she had invoked, for she would cut out her tongue before she would let *anyone* know that she was possessed of anything that made her different from other people. She felt that if anyone knew she would be set apart, shunned like poor old Antony Casper, who had a disease that made him slowly turn black so that no one would go any nearer to him than just enough to put some food into the back door of his miserable cottage. She'd be like that. Everyone'd shun her. Even Blair, maybe. No, she couldn't tell him.

Anyway, though she'd invoked the sign—at least she felt that Amandy Meegs would call it a sign—it

had failed of its mark, for Aunt Judith had gone away without knowing it *was* a sign, a direct retribution for her unfeeling disposal of Flossie's litter, a warning against future violations of Martha's rights. Aunt Judith would never know. She'd probably always think that Charlie Pickering had fallen off the roof on purpose, or at best, because he was so careless.

Now Martha felt sorry for Aunt Judith. Aunt Judith had not wanted to go, just now when there was the spring work to do at Twin Farms. And Martha felt sorry for Charlie Pickering. She knew him only by name, but Aunt Judith had made of that name a vivid personality. Long ago Martha had become familiar with the peccadilloes of Charlie, Aunt Judith's stepson, by hearing Aunt Judith talk them over with her father when she was around. Aunt Judith always had spelled out the most interesting words, but that had added to the general fascination. Martha knew that Charlie's worst offense had been marrying, immediately after Aunt Judith had come to Twin Farms, a "little helpless thing with about as much sense in her finger as Amandy Meegs has in her whole body, and that's mighty little." Martha felt sorry that Charlie Pickering and this senseless wife had to be instruments in her avengement. Alas, remorse was fast overcoming her.

Her low spirits were in glaring contrast to the jubilation which Blair and Amandy Meegs were making no effort to conceal. Apparently Rachel was celebrating by rolling over and going to sleep after her

father's call. "What she won't get for *that,*" Amandy and Blair both were saying, each one knowing that she wouldn't "get" anything, for no one would tell about it and Aunt Judith was not there to see. Martha found Blair executing a sort of an Indian war dance around Amandy, who was beating eggs and threatening the boy with alternate sweeps of her arm. Amandy did not dance over her new liberty, but her tongue was wagging as fast as Blair's feet moved.

"Get *out* of my way! Did you hear her say I couldn't pick out the good eggs? If all she's thinkin' 'bout is her eggs when her son's lyin' nigh to Death's door I won't worry about whether they're good or bad, even if he is a stepson. Mis' Judith Pickering thinks there ain't anybody can do things like she can. Will you keep out from under foot, Blair Bradshaw? Now where's Rachel? She'll get it. If her pa hears that she ain't down with the rest of you. Good morning, Marty. Seems to me you look a little peeked. Don't know as I ever saw anyone go as white as you did when you laid eyes on that telegram of your Aunt Judith's. Telegrams is like that. Scare a body to death. I know a woman who did just sit back and die when she got one. She was eighty-three. And all there was in the telegram was that her granddaughter had a baby. But she never waited to read it. Don't you two go and tell your pa that Rachel wasn't down this morning. Don't know as I blame her. When the cat's away the mice'll play. Not that I'm meaning your Aunt Judith's a cat. She's a fine woman, but she

does set a lot of store by rules. Rules is all right for grammer, I guess, but I don't know as anyone can expect a body to live by 'em eternally. Any more'n I can do my baking by those rules that come in that cookbook with the last lot of tea. If I didn't use my common sense and my instinct more'n those rules, I'd have many a flat cake, I can tell you."

As Amandy rolled her eyes from side to side, Martha shuddered. She wished Amandy would not talk so much. She wished Blair wouldn't act so possessed. She wished Rachel had gotten up just as though Aunt Judith were home. She dished out her cereal and took it to the table in the corner of the big sunny kitchen and sat down before it. Martha loved both the morning and oatmeal, but now there was neither zest in her manner nor relish in her eating. Blair joined her at the table, but she answered only briefly to his nonsense; a distance infinitely greater than the width of spotless table cloth divided her from her pal.

"Like as not your pa'll call a meetin' to-night," declared Amandy from the stove where she was turning bacon. And poor Martha's heart missed a beat.

Blair was overjoyed at such a possibility.

"Hurray!" he cried. "Hope he does. Less time to study. Get a hustle on you, Marty, if you're going to walk to school with me."

Martha rose at once from the table, glad of an excuse to escape the remainder of her breakfast. Each

of them had tasks to do before going to school and she would not shirk hers because Aunt Judith's eyes were not on her. This morning she shook out her pillows and put her bedding near the window to air, finding comforting satisfaction in so doing, for more times than not she smoothed over her bed without airing its clothes one little bit. She hung her nightdress in the old wardrobe and shut the door of the wardrobe carefully behind her. She put her small bureau-top in order and straightened her books on the little table by the window that served for her as a desk. She could hear Blair whistling out in the yard as he brought in wood for the kitchen wood-box. From her window she could see that he had not moved Black Star and Saucy Sally to new pasture so she would have time to do that which, without any conscious mental processes, she had decided to do. She would make a "promise."

On the wall of her room, close to where the ceiling met the sloping side wall, was an old stove-pipe hole unused since Amariah Bradshaw had put in a furnace. Now it was covered by a rusty black tin plate. This was easily reached and as easily removed and into the gap behind it Martha had fitted a round tin can which made a satisfactory hiding place for her "promises." The tin can was almost full of promises. They were promises which Martha Bradshaw made to the world in general and herself in particular.

This one she was going to make was the most solemn and important promise she ever had made.

She wrote it out painstakingly on a sheet of her school pad.

"I, Martha Bradshaw, solemnly swear that I will never use my power because I am the seventh child of a seventh child until death closes my eyes in the last long sleep. And I swear that I will never tell anyone about it, even Blair, for I am ashamed of having anything like that inside me, and I will pray to God to cast it out when I say my prayers, which I will do twice as often and much longer.

"Signed,

"MARTHA BRADSHAW.

"P. S.—For breaking this promise I will give to Nelly Howe my seal ring."

She folded the paper and sealed it with a daub of the sealing wax Rachel had given her for Christmas and which she melted at the candle on her table. Then she reached up, removed the tin plate and put the promise with the others in the box behind it.

"There!" she declared aloud and drew a long breath. She felt less like Antony Casper and more like Martha Bradshaw. She had put that sheet of paper between her and the thing that made her feel squeamy. She was ready to join Blair and go to school.

Martha and Blair still attended the school in the village. Next year Blair would go to Middletown, three miles away, for his last two years in High. Then maybe Blair would go to college. Roger and Dick had gone to the University of Vermont. Joan and Molly had not gone to college and Rachel had not wanted to,

but Martha had made up her mind that she would go—go with Blair. She was only one year behind him.

Martha loved school. To her school meant association with books and books opened the way to great wonders. There were not many books at Twin Farms, for there never had been much time there for anyone to read them. Martha loved even her arithmetic books. She found a thrill in making the figures of any mathematical problem come out right. She always wrote "a-n-s" with a beautiful flourish. And she adored geography. It made the world seem to be just beyond the hills that held Greenbury like the sides of a great green bowl. She had to labor with composition for her imagination as yet had had little exercise but her diminutive essays were always neatly copied and invariably came back to her with a "well done" pencilled in red across their tops. She liked school this year particularly because she was in Miss Everett's grade and at present the sun, moon, and stars moved for her and Nelly Howe about Miss Everett. The only envy Martha ever had suffered was for Nelly Howe, because Miss Everett boarded with the Howes.

"Hurry up," called Blair to Martha from the kitchen porch where he waited for her, swinging his books from a strap in one hand, holding in the other the lunch box Amandy had packed to bursting. "I want to see Ted Deming before school."

Martha joined him, hugging her books under her arm. Just so they had started off for school since the day when Martha, very small and stiff in starched petti-

coats and tight pigtails, had begun her school days under Blair's protection.

Their way led down a road that descended gently to the bottom of the green bowl, a road that turned and turned pleasantly and that was skirted by sweet-smelling fir trees and tangled copse, an old road that was hard and white with the passing of many, a road over which generations of Bradshaws had travelled. It was flanked with friendly farmhouses and Martha knew everyone and everything about everyone in each of them. It was a part of the gladness of going to school on a new morning to hullo to Jim Houston, sharpening his tools at a grindstone by his barn door, or to call to Miss Variety Simpkins hanging out her wash on the line, or to wave to Freeman Mile's deaf and dumb son; it was a part of the gladness of the morning to throw back one's head and fill one's lungs with the keen air, to pause a-tiptoe when a covey of birds flew out of the copse, or a harmless snake scuttled across before one. It was part of the morning just being a little girl headed for school, for then one did not have to walk sedately as one walked to church or meeting, one could race, skimming fleetly over the road, sometimes almost beating Blair. But this morning Martha walked with even step. She had so much to think about that she could not even talk to Blair.

Blair was full of the small liberties he intended taking during Aunt Judith's absence. He wasn't going to hang around the house every afternoon after school. He was going fishing with Ted this very afternoon.

Ted had said the trout were running big in Silver Brook.

"Ted's got a new casting line," Blair said enviously.

At any other time Martha would have begged to go with Blair and Ted. Sometimes the boys let her go with them. But now she was thinking that she'd go straight home from school and help Amandy, or maybe sew the lace on her petticoat. She intended doing everything exactly as though Aunt Judith were home. In fact, she intended doing everything *twice* as well. And if Rachel and Blair shirked their tasks, she'd do what they left undone.

"I don't wish any hard luck on Charlie Pickering, but I hope he's laid up a long time," Blair observed, hard-heartedly, aiming a stone at a tree trunk.

"I don't. I hope Aunt Judith comes home real soon," Martha answered so vehemently that Blair swung on her.

"What ails you, baby?"

Martha winced, not so much at his taunt as at her helplessness to retort. She could not answer him; the promise she had put in the box bound her to secrecy. A secret from Blair was a hard thing for her to keep. but it would be much worse to tell Blair and have him know about that thing inside of her that made her different. So she said nothing and kept her face turned from him. And Blair was too busy with his own plans to press her further.

Martha continued her own deliberations. If father called a meeting she'd say that she wanted to do

Aunt Judith's work, she'd fill the breach that Aunt Judith's going made in the household routine. It would be exacting but Martha wanted it to be so. She was not posing, even in her own mind, as an example of merit; she was seeking only some way in which to make up to Aunt Judith for suffering under the "sign."

CHAPTER III

ANOTHER MEETING

FATHER did call a meeting. At dinner-time, this day after Aunt Judith's going, he said, "Well, we'd better get together to-night and see what's what." And Amandy Meegs looked at Blair and Blair looked at Martha and grinned. But Martha did not smile. She said, "All right," just as Rachel and Blair said, "All right." And Amandy said: "I guess you'd better, Mr. Bradshaw, for there's a lot of what's whatting to what with Mis' Judith packin' up and goin' while you're saying Jack Robinson."

These family meetings were an institution of Twin Farms. Martha did not know any other family in Greenbury that had them. Sometimes Rachel and Blair laughed at them, but Martha never did. She thought they were very splendid. Nothing, even trivial, happened at Twin Farms that the family did not meet to discuss it. Father believed in things being thrashed out. And in the most important and the most trivial she, the youngest, had her voice in the thrashing as did Amandy Meegs, the help. Father held that Amandy, by loyalty and long service, had made herself one of the family. They had met to vote on whether or not Blair could have a bicycle. Martha and Amandy had cast the votes that had won it for him, for father thought it would make him lazy and Rachel did not see

why Blair should have one when she never had had one. But Martha had wanted him to have it and had made Amandy vote for it, too, by simply fastening her eyes beggingly on Amandy's. Usually, in meeting, Martha voted as her father did, but on the matter of the bicycle she had stood for Blair.

Martha thought her father the wisest, bravest man, who ever lived. She thought he must be exactly like that Noah Bradshaw, who had been the first of the name to come into the Vermont Valley. Martha knew all about this Noah, for he was in a book which father had bought and kept on the what-not in the sitting-room. "Early History of Vermont." Noah Bradshaw had made one of that little band of men despatched by General Amherst into the then-called Wilderness to punish and rout the Indian tribes there. This Noah had seen women and children scalped by the barbarous marauders and he needed no urging to inflict retribution. He had returned a few years later to the land of stern mountains and great forests and had begun a clearing, felling the giant trees with a tireless spirit and building of the hewn logs a home that must stand as strong as that spirit. He had married the sister of a fellow pioneer and, together, these two had planted their fields, had housed their scant crops, tended the few live stock, met the weariness and privations of long white winters and the ever-present fear of Indian attack. Martha liked to think that something of that Noah Bradshaw's blood flowed in her own veins, that the rambling gabled farmhouse that was her home

stood on the very spot where Noah had built that log cabin.

Just as that Noah Bradshaw must have stood often in the doorway of his cabin and viewed his tiny clearing, his acre of tasselled corn, his yellowing wheat, his cattle, carefully penned from the wild beasts of the forest, and looked upon them as good, so Amariah Bradshaw liked to sit on his doorstep and look out upon Twin Farms, twenty and twenty times as many acres as Noah had possessed, acres of orchard and corn and meadow-land, pens for the sheep and the pigs and the calves, a great barn for the hay and smaller barns for the horses and the farm implements, and looked upon them as good. Martha often sat beside him, looking with her father's eyes and vaguely feeling what her father was feeling. Sometimes he talked about the crops with her, really just talked aloud without expecting her to understand, but she did and she understood his pride. He was going to add more cattle. He talked often about that. Vermont was taking its place in the sun as a cattle-raising state. He had read in a newspaper the amazing information that in Vermont the cows outnumbered the people. Some day he was going to buy from Freeman Miles the fifty acres that adjoined Twin Farms. Then he'd acquire the finest stock that could be bought.

He talked about the village straggling over the floor of the valley below his doorstep. He talked about the village as though it belonged to him and Martha always thrilled at that. His pride in the new railroad

station with its telegraph office and its two-track siding was hers. She knew how he'd fought unflinchingly for the brick schoolhouse, how, just the year before with his own hands he'd ousted the undesirable Zach Stanney, who'd attempted to open a saloon at the fourcorners. She had seen the little crowd around them and father's heavy hand gripping Zach Stanney's collar. No town meeting was ever held when Amariah Bradshaw did not sit in the midst of it, no town meeting ever held when Amariah Bradshaw did not hold out for what was going to make their little village a better place to live in, a place worthy of the mother state. Martha knew that.

Because he was such as he was, Martha thought it only right that her father should be big in stature. A great, strong man—like the mountains. His massive head grew straight out of his massive shoulders as though he had no neck; he had a way of planting his feet squarely, a little apart—like the giants of fairy stories. He did not talk much—except about Twin Farms and Greenbury and Vermont.

But because one could not live in Greenbury even the small span of fifteen years and not know what everyone said and thought, Martha knew that Amariah Bradshaw's neighbors sometimes called him queer and laughed at him. Philemon Baggs, after a town meeting, had said that Amariah Bradshaw was as close as a collar two sizes too small. It was a crazy notion, his, not buying one of these gas-buggies. And he still used oxen for the hill ploughing. He'd worn the same

Prince Albert as long as anyone could remember. Folks knew how little the Bradshaw young ones spent on their backs and on sodas at Couch's new soda-fountain; folks knew how he'd given Joan one hundred dollars for her wedding and her wedding clothes and had told her that she'd have to make that do. Amandy Meegs brought back their comments to Twin Farms, about the Bradshaw girls still playing the square piano that had been their mother's when she was a girl, and about Amariah holding for oil lamps and candles when he certainly had influence enough to have a feed wire strung up his road. Martha knew how the neighbors called him queer and close and laughed at his ways, but she didn't mind, for she knew, too, that they loved him and looked to him when things went wrong and how they respected his word, brief though it was, and abided by it.

Martha thought Twin Farms the nicest place in the world to live. The rambling house, so typical of New England, looked as though it had grown bit by bit to what it was, instead of being built with human hands; the big kitchen, with its wide porch, had grown out of the living-rooms in the front, the wood-shed, always stacked to its roof with good-smelling split wood, grew out of the kitchen, the milk house grew out of the wood-shed, and the old barn grew out of the milk house. Now, since father had built the new barns the old one was used to house the farm implements and made an entrancing place to play on rainy days.

Of course it had been nicer at Twin Farms before

Roger and Dick and Joan and Molly had gone away. Joan had married a young man who lived in a city in middle New York and Martha had gathered from words dropped between Aunt Judith and Amandy that her father held it almost a disgrace for a child of his to marry a Yorker. Joan had met the man while she was visiting the Benton girl, who had gone to teach school in Burlington. Amandy had reckoned in Martha's hearing that "if Joan had married Jamie Allan, the postmaster's son, who wanted her but didn't have the gumption to tell her that he did, her pa would have given her a heap more for her wedding," and Martha had wished with her whole heart that Joan had known the postmaster's son wanted her, for a big wedding would have been so nice. Amandy declared later that Molly could have Jamie Allan, if she wanted him, but Molly had favored a college friend of Dick's and had gone to live in Northampton, where she hired a girl to run her "half-a-house," so that she could be free to manage a bustling tea-room. Molly's wedding had been so simple that Martha never had felt she was really truly married. It had not needed even a hundred dollars. Molly had worn a plain dark dress and had walked into the room and looked at everyone and said: "Well, are you ready?" Martha blamed Roger and Dick for that. If they hadn't gone away and made father so angry, Molly might have been more really married with a veil and bridesmaids and a wedding cake.

Father's anger about Roger and Dick going away had been something Martha never would forget. It

had happened four years ago, but she still could remember each detail, each word of that meeting when it had been discussed. Father had been so angry that the boys wanted to go and the boys had been angry at father for wanting to hold them. Martha herself had been sadly torn by it all. She could see why Roger wanted to take the job in the mill at Troy that he'd gotten through a college friend of his and why Dick wanted to go with a chum of his to an exporting house in Boston; working in a mill and in an exporting office sounded very exciting to Martha, but she could understand, too, why father wanted to keep them at Twin Farms. Child though she was, she had suffered with both sides; though most of the stormy unthinking words had passed over her understanding she had comprehended the feeling beneath them. The boys had said no one ever could make any money on the land, that if anyone made a little with one thing it had to go right back into the soil and father had answered scornfully to that by demanding to know if money was all they looked for from their labor? And Roger had called father "narrow" and father had charged him with being false to the tradition of his kind. There had been a hurt with father's anger that made it different from his anger at any other time. She and Blair whispered about it afterward. Martha had resolved that father must never be hurt-angry again. She had made a "promise" about it. She had made Blair resolve it with her.

The family "meetings" were held always in the

sitting-room at Twin Farms. It was a big room with windows looking out over the hills. It was the living-room for the Twin Farms family; its chairs were knobby and their upholstering frayed and faded, but they invited human occupancy by their ease and their sturdiness. The roses of the carpeting had long since lost their bright hue, but the nap was still soft to the tread. The round table, covered with the blue and white plaid cloth, always groaned with schoolbooks and newspapers and farm journals, and Aunt Judith's and Rachel's sewing baskets. From the mantel back of the stove the blue glass vases that had been sent from England to Martha's mother when she was married made a splash of warm color. In one corner stood a what-not, its upper shelves filled with photographs of different Bradshaws. Among them was one of Roger, taken when he was ten years old, another of Joan looking at a big book upside down, one of Martha and Blair taken together and framed in a bracket made of shells. On the bottom shelf of the what-not was the family Bible. And next to that the "Early History of Vermont." Near the what-not was the old horse-hair sofa moved from its place in the parlor to give honor to a new one of golden oak and green plush. Martha and Blair loved the "antik," as Amandy called it, because its coverings were so delightfully slippery and offered such endless fun during the long winter days. It was a homey room, this living-room of Twin Farms, a lived-in-room, warm and shadowy with lamp glow of an evening, airy and spacious by day.

Now, at the stroke of eight, the family filed into it, Amandy wiping her hands on her gingham apron, Blair noisily rejoicing that the meeting must keep him from his homework. Martha turned away from the big-armed chair where Aunt Judith always sat because its emptiness reproached her. She squatted down quickly on a stool close to her father and held her hands tight together, waiting for the meeting to begin.

"I don't know as there's anything to talk about to-night except how we're going to manage until Aunt Judith gets back," father began in his slow voice. Father always talked slowly and Martha always had had the belief that he had to go hunting somewhere deep within him for the words he wanted to use.

"I guess that'll be enough," spoke up Amandy promptly. "With all there is to do 'round here. The spring cleanin' and those chicks in the incubator and them new napkins to be hemmed and Lizzie Pierce waitin' for them rags to be sewed up for her to make into rugs—"

"I can do all that," said Martha in a voice that trembled in spite of her.

"You!" Amandy ejaculated. And Rachel laughed.

"I mean—I'd like to try to do everything that Aunt Judith does, just while she's away."

Amandy snorted again and Rachel leaned forward and looked hard at Martha. Martha knew that Rachel thought she was trying to show off. And she wasn't. She wished they wouldn't make it so difficult for her. And what if they questioned her!

She opened her lips to speak, but Rachel spoke before her. And Rachel spoke very fast, as though she wanted to press what she had to say before they all got to talking about Aunt Judith's work.

"There *is* something else to talk about, father, and it's only fair you talk about it first. Don't you remember Molly in her last letter wanted me to go down to visit her? And you said we'd talk about it at the next meeting. And this is it. And we must talk about it now. Molly may not want me later. I haven't been out of this place all winter. And I need a new dress terribly. I can get some cloth in the city for next to nothing and make it myself. Molly will help me—"

Father's slow voice cut into Rachel's arguments.

"I haven't been out of this valley for four years," he rebuked her.

"Well, you're—different. You like it here," Rachel answered fretfully. "But it's dead—for a girl, like me. When I'm as old as you are probably I won't mind."

Amariah Bradshaw suddenly thrust his great head forward so that his eyes bored through Rachel. Martha thought he was angry. "Do you know, Rachel, that Conger Smith is going to Northampton to work for his uncle—going to-morrow? I saw his father to-day and he told me."

Rachel shrank back a little from her father's intent gaze. "It doesn't matter a fig to me where he goes," she answered, laughing so as to make the suggestion seem ridiculous. But Martha, watching her face, saw

the color mount over it; Martha caught a new note in Rachel's voice. It *did* matter to Rachel where Conger Smith went! Martha hung on her father's answer. She forgot that Rachel had forestalled her own plea. Would father say that Rachel could go? And if he said he didn't want her to go and put it to the rest of them, what would she say? For she wanted Rachel to go, just as she had wanted Blair to have his bicycle, she wanted Rachel to visit Molly in the little half-of-a-house she herself had never seen, she wanted Rachel to make the new dress and maybe see Conger Smith, maybe go to a theatre with him! Oh, it was all so exciting that she forgot Aunt Judith and her own intended sacrifice.

Rachel did not want father to talk any more about Conger Smith, so she continued to press the point about the clothes. "I'll get some cloth for a dress for Marty, too. Molly wrote that things are awfully cheap in the stores in the city. And you can shop around, too—you don't have to buy everything at one place like you do in Middletown. My garden's all planted and I'll pay Jerry for tending to it while I'm gone. Or Blair—"

"Not me!" spoke up Blair, quickly.

Father was tapping the arms of his chair. His eyes were fixed on the wall opposite him and Martha could see that they were brooding. There was something in them that had been in them when Roger and Dick wanted to go away. But when he answered it was gently.

"Will a week or so do you?"

"Oh, *father*! I couldn't do anything in a week. It wouldn't be worth the car fare. If I can't stay three or four weeks I won't go at all."

Martha held her breath waiting for father's answer.

"Well, we'll put it up to the family," he answered. "Marty, what do you say about it?"

Martha jumped. Her vote always had come last.

"Why, I—I vote—yes."

"I'll trim a hat for you, Marty," beamed Rachel.

"I say yes, too," shouted Blair without waiting to be asked.

"I guess I can do for you all without her help," spoke up Amandy, managing by her tone to make Rachel's help seem not much. "One less stomach to cook victuals for."

"That will make a big difference," giggled Rachel.

Father's eyes were almost pleading as they fastened on Rachel's glowing face. "Will you come back contented?" he asked.

Rachel ran to him and kissed him. "As contented as can be," she promised lightly. Then she sat down again, but it was on the edge of her chair. She was tremendously excited. So was Blair. So was Amandy. So was Martha, herself. Maybe Molly's husband would teach Rachel to drive the little car Molly had written about. And Amandy wanted Rachel to see if that hired girl of Molly's didn't sit around and do nothing with Molly away all day long running the tea-room. And Martha wanted Rachel to buy her a pink dress. The three of them tried to talk at once. Every-

one had forgotten Aunt Judith's going until father spoke of it.

"Well, Amandy, is there anything else you want to talk about? Anything about things here at Twin Farms?"

Amandy grudgingly gave this brief consideration. "Don't know as there is. I can manage. The churn's been mended and I guess I can pick out the paper for the shelves down at Cross's as good as Mis' Judith can. And the tea man'll be 'round here next week and I'll get some new tins—"

Martha, remembering what she wanted, leaned forward quickly. "Father, I—"

Father nodded to her. "Well, then, we've only got to decide who's going to be boss while Aunt Judith's away. It ought to be Rachel of course, but Rachel wants to go away and make flounces and fol-de-rols. But here's Marty offering to shoulder the job." For the life of her Martha could not tell whether her father was laughing at her or speaking in earnest. "What say you all to letting the girl try it?" His glance took in Rachel, Blair, and Amandy.

"Bully!" approved Blair, who was finding things going more to his liking than he had dared hope.

"Why, yes, let her run the house if she's so crazy to," put in Rachel indifferently.

"Amariah Bradshaw, if you weren't sittin' there as sober-speakin' as any man, I'd think you'd gone clean daft," ejaculated Amandy. "Me takin' my orders from a girl just turned fifteen—"

"Fie, fie, woman, did you ever take orders from anyone?" And now Martha saw father wink at Amandy. "It's a good chance for the girl to learn responsibility. Help her. I'd rather it had been Rachel, but Marty shall have her turn. And I guess when Aunt Judith comes back the girl'll think more of all the good woman's doing for us."

"I guess she will, all right," assented Amandy, importantly. "She can come right back with me now to the kitchen and begin thinking. There's bread to set."

Martha rose slowly from her stool. Her sacrifice was beginning. For she'd much rather follow Rachel to her room and talk about packing.

CHAPTER IV

THE GYPSIES

MARTHA sat on the kitchen porch at Twin Farms sewing carpet rags. She was not exactly happy—how could a girl be happy sewing carpet rags when spring was riding over the world, when her best chum had gone to the woods after wildflowers and with Miss Everett, and Blair was off goodness knew where? She'd sewed so many of the ravelled ends that she could do it with one eye, and watch the road with the other.

There was a definite reason for her wanting Blair to come home. Blair must have seen the gypsies. Everyone was talking about the gypsies who had come to the valley the day before from up Hammerton way. Freeman Miles had told father the evening before and Amandy Meegs had heard of it at the fourcorners. Philemon Baggs had told her that they were riding in a crazy looking house on top of an automobile. He'd seen the contraption in front of Jasper Towney's farm. It'd be like Jasper Towney to let gypsies camp on his place, he had said. When one went to the ridge woods for wildflowers one passed the Towney place, so without doubt Nelly Howe and Miss Everett would see it, too, maybe see the gypsies. No, Martha was not happy.

Amandy, working in the kitchen, was keeping up a fire of talk. Amandy was, under all circumstances, a

sociable creature. She spoke now in a shrill squeak that her voice might reach Martha outside.

"Wouldn't you a-thought the committee'd had something more'n cold boiled ham and potato salad at that benefit last night? There was the skimpiest biscuits you ever seen. Socials ain't like they used to be. I remember the chickens and turkeys and the pies and cakes we used to have. Folks used to bake for days ahead. But that's Sabina Calkins all over. You wouldn't see her workin' overtime bakin' for anybody. Anyways, I guess they took in enough for that new carpet for the Sunday-school room. Goodness knows they've been long 'nough raisin' it. Like to've worn out the floor, waitin' for it. Mis' Calkins is goin' to Middletown herself to buy it."

Martha watched the road and sewed the rags. She was not interested in the benefit of the night before or the new carpet. Not even in Kitsy Tubbs' new dress. "Showin' it off like it was new, but I saw what it was. That old purple silk of hers turned," Amandy shrilled.

"Wouldn't you think Rachel'd write something when she wrote at all?" Now Martha listened. Like Amandy, she had found Rachel's letters unsatisfactory. Rachel had been away now three weeks. Though she wrote home dutifully twice a week, her letters said nothing about any new hat or dress for Martha or what she and Molly were doing or whether she was seeing Conger Smith. Like Amandy, Martha thought Rachel mean to be so stingy with real news.

It had been three weeks since Aunt Judith went

away and Martha had lost the exultation she had enjoyed in bearing the burden of Aunt Judith's responsibilities at Twin Farms. They'd become too much of a burden for her young spirit. She felt she was over-atoning for her wrong-doing. She wasn't the "boss" at all, father only had meant for her to learn something of responsibility and Amandy certainly was seeing to it that she learned. She was learning, too, how much Aunt Judith did for them all. Amandy always summed up work in "steps." "I guess you'll find how many steps a body has to take to do the work in this house," was a frequent comment of hers. A week after Aunt Judith's going Martha knew how many "steps" Aunt Judith took, and that didn't count the detestable carpet rags and the hemming of the napkins, which one did with one's fingers.

Nor did Flossie's demeanor help Martha's spirit. Flossie was downright kittenish, cavorting around the garden in a manner very unbecoming to a bereaved mother. "I don't believe she even remembers she had any kittens," Martha had thought in disgust. She was more than ever ashamed of her avengement. It had been so wasted.

Amandy brought out the clean milk cans and set them in a shining row on the stone by the well. Returning to the porch she paused on the step, her hands rolled in her apron. She regarded the ball of carpet rags with a critical eye.

"Seems like you don't make so much as a hole in that ball," she declared, discouragingly. "Don't know

what Mis' Judith's goin' to say when she comes back and sees it."

This was a straw too much. Martha threw down the end she had picked out. "I don't care what she says. It's—it's silly to sew them. It's silly to make the rugs. We have more now than we need."

"It's waste not to make them up. Sinful waste," reminded Amandy.

"I don't care if it is waste—not even if it's sinful waste. I—I wanted to go to the woods this afternoon. It's such a gorgeous day. And—and Nelly Howe went. She—she went with Miss Everett." Poor Martha had difficulty controlling her voice.

She did not add that Nelly Howe and Miss Everett might see the gypsies. She knew that Amandy held gypsies to be in league with the devil. And hadn't father a big part in running out of the village the only other gypsies that had invaded their valley?

Amandy Meegs lifted her long nose and sniffed at the sweet air. Spring didn't mean much more to her than the usual overhauling of everything in the big house and a consequent ache in her back. But next to Blair she liked Martha best of her "family" and Martha's voice had been woeful as she said, "It's such a gorgeous day." Amandy bent down and took up the ball of rags.

"Now you run 'long to the woods. Like as not you can find Nelly Howe and Mis' Everett. These rags can wait 'til a rainy day."

"Oh, *Amandy!*" Martha cried, springing to her

feet. If she took a short cut over the wood road she might find them. And she'd sew harder than ever on the detestable rags to-morrow—to make up.

She sped through the orchard, skirted the barns. A sense of adventure lent wings to her feet. Adventure was in the very air. For weren't there gypsies abroad?

The wood road cut into the ridge road near the woods. Martha went straight to her and Nelly Howe's favorite haunts; many a time the children had picnicked on the ridge, near the Boulders or at the Bear's Cave or at Pulpit Rock. There was a dear little glen always merry with bird-song and carpeted with moss, with a crystal pool of water from a hidden spring lying like a shining gem in its heart. But she found no sign of Nelly Howe or Miss Everett at any of these. She listened for an echo of their voices; she hulloed again and again. Either they had gone somewhere else or had abandoned their excursion. Perhaps Nelly was at home, just talking to Miss Everett. Or maybe they'd driven to Middletown with Nelly's father in the new Ford.

Disappointed, she turned back toward the road. She might just as well have stayed home and "made a hole" in that ball of rags. She felt very much alone and a little resentful at Nelly Howe. Nelly had been so unpleasantly boastful about spending the afternoon with Miss Everett!

Out in the road she paused. She could go back the way she had come or she could follow the ridge road

the long way home through the valley, the way that led past Jasper Towney's. She deliberated for a moment. Jasper Towney's farm faced the ridge road adjacent to the wood. If she could just catch a glimpse of the house on wheels then her afternoon would hold something. She started along the road.

But almost at the Towney farm she thought suddenly that it might not be pleasant encountering gypsies alone. Martha had no fear of anything she knew. But gypsies and their ways were different from anything she knew. They were vagabonds; "loafers," her father had called that other band, though Martha did not like the sound of the word as applied to the picturesque men and women she had watched from a safe distance. "Dirty critters," Amandy had styled them, contemptuously, and Martha thought that equally unfitting; *she* thought the swarthy creatures in their bright scarlets and yellows, their cheap bangles glinting like gold in the sunlight, very grand. Robbers they might be, it was true, but that went with their being gypsies. And their queen had told Miranda Mercy's fortune. To be sure she told her she was going to get a letter from a dark man and to everyone's knowledge Miranda hadn't gotten it yet, but then even a gypsy queen could make a mistake or perhaps something had happened to the dark man just as he was going to write the letter. That other wandering crew had fascinated Martha tremendously. But now she shrank from encountering any of the sort alone. They might kidnap her. Though she thrilled a little just thinking of such a possibility,

at the same moment her common sense told her that she could not be a party to the sensation her disappearance would make in the valley and that living a captive with the gypsies, even though it be in a house on wheels, would not be nearly as nice and happy as living at Twin Farms. Besides it wouldn't be fair to Amandy to leave her with those carpet rags.

So Martha turned and went back toward the wood road. Half-way there she thought of the lumber trail that led up to the Hermit's Cabin. Why, maybe Nelly Howe and Miss Everett were there!

She hurried through the wood to the trail. Long ago, in the days when there had been lumbering on the hillside, it had been cut through the forest. Now its deep ruts were almost overgrown with delicate ferns; the tree branches met overhead. It was an alluring trail for the sunlight filtered through the young leaves and danced on the tips of the ferns. If Martha had not been so engrossed in thinking that Nelly Howe and Miss Everett must have gone to the Hermit's Cabin, she would have noticed that something heavy had passed very recently that way; there were the marks of tires in the soft earth, the ferns were crushed in two irregular tracks.

But Martha did not notice that. She went ahead quickly. The Hermit's Cabin was just beyond the edge of wood. It was on a rise of ground and commanded a sweeping view of the valley beyond Greenbury. It had been built, originally, to house a lumber crew, but when from disuse it fell into a dilapidated state, old Abner Joslyn had taken up his residence there. Old

Abner was a little "touched," so folks left him alone. He had died long since, but his ghost was supposed to come often and sit on the doorstep of the old cabin, as harmless as old Abner himself had been in his lifetime. No one went to the cabin at night, but in the daytime it was a favorite picnic spot with Greenbury young people. Many a time Martha and Nelly Howe had taken bread and bacon and potatoes and cooked their lunch over a fire built on the flat rocks in front of the cabin.

Approaching the edge of the wood, Martha fancied she heard voices and she gave the call that was her and Nelly Howe's secret signal. Then she stood still to hear the answer. It came promptly, but it was a lusty "Hullo! Who comes?" And the answering voice had a quality of heartiness in its tone not like anything Martha had ever heard. It seemed to come straight from the fresh spring heart of the wood.

She had to go on. Only a few steps took her to the edge of the wood and to that amazing voice. And when she had taken these she stopped abruptly, a quick "oh" escaping from her parted lips. For there in the clearing close to the old cabin stood a little square house on wheels, a gaudy little house, painted a pinkish color with green trim, with doll-size flower boxes at the tiny square windows, an absurd veranda at the back of the house and a girl leaning over its rail. It was the gypsy wagon!

Martha was not frightened because not at once could she believe her eyes. They couldn't quite register it all on her mind. Why, there were real flowers in the

boxes—what a funny dress the girl wore—whatever was the man doing—and the little house was really an automobile! There in the front of it was a steering wheel.

"Good afternoon!" The man was approaching her. But she did not turn to flee—that would have been absurd for the man's smile was so kindly. "Have you come to tea?" he was asking her, advancing closer.

Gypsy he might be—he wore a bright red kerchief knotted about his throat—but he spoke in a voice rich and deep and he was extending a hand toward Martha that was so white and beautifully shaped that it held her eyes in wonder. And asking her to tea!

"Willa and I were just quarrelling over whether we'd have strawberry jam or kumquats for our tea. We've only two bottles of the kumquats and I am for saving them, but Willa must have kumquats! She's being very disagreeable over it. And you've come in time to decide for us."

"I'm not disagreeable at all, Demy dear, but I'm horribly tired of strawberry jam for tea," called the girl from the tiny veranda. "And if we're to have a guest of *course* we must open the kumquats. So there, Demy."

"Does that settle it, Miss Little-girl-of-the-woods? Do you live in that hollow tree down the trail and is the red-headed woodpecker your brother?"

Martha's heart skipped a beat. Gypsies—they were mad gypsies! But, oh, how handsome the man was and what a lovely name—Willa! And what were kumquats? And they couldn't have been quarrelling for

the man's face looked as though it never had done anything but smile and the girl was like a sunbeam, perched there against the pinky house in her queer dress that was the color of honey and the brilliant orange sash tied about her waist.

The man did not notice that Martha did not answer nor that she had not taken his proffered hand. He waved her forward toward the little house. She advanced uncertainly and he did not notice this hesitation. He went back to what he had been doing—kindling a fire on the stones over which she and the other children often had built a fire. His tall figure was silhouetted against the deep blue of the sky; it was very straight and lean and strong. Martha could see the muscles in his arms and his shoulders moving. And those white hands were strong, too—strong as father's withal they were so white.

"Willa, your manners, child," he laughed.

"Oh, I am sorry!" And with the prettiest grace imaginable the girl straightened from her lounging position against the veranda rail and descended the two steps to the ground.

"Will you come into the house? You may help me spread the tea-things."

Martha gulped. She was not frightened, but she was dumb with amazement. The girl was beckoning toward the tiny green door over which hung a quaint lantern of wrought iron. The door was a little ajar and Martha caught a glimpse of bright color within—of a wicker chair with a fat cushion, of a picture—

And these were the gypsies!

CHAPTER V

MARTHA TELLS BLAIR

At SUPPER, when no one was looking, Martha gave Blair a signal. She touched her lip three times and pulled her ear. That meant she had something to tell Blair, and Blair alone. This was a part of a secret code they had instituted years ago and which they still found convenient at times. And Blair nodded his understanding. Without the signal he must have seen that Martha was bursting to tell something. She was wriggling on her chair, scarcely tasting her supper and was saying not a word when usually she had a great deal to say when she could get her voice in around Amandy's.

Not even when father spoke of the gypsies did Martha ask any questions. Only Blair was too interested himself to notice Martha's quiet. He hadn't seen the gypsies, but Ted Deming had, and had told him about the curious caravan. Father hadn't seen them, either, but the whole village was talking about Jasper Towney letting the outfit stay on his place. The village was up in arms at Jasper Towney. "Like him," Amandy averred. "He'd do anything he figgered was contrary to other folks. Well, you'd better put locks on things, Amariah Bradshaw, and count your chickens. Them dirty critters will find it poor pickin' round the Towney place and like as not they'll go visitin', come nightfall." And Amandy smacked her lips with pleasant foreboding.

Martha wriggled more than ever and buttered and rebuttered her slice of bread, her heart pounding against her ribs. *She* knew these gypsies would not go about stealing. Hadn't she seen the doll-size cupboard filled with jars and cans with bright labels—strange labels? Hadn't she tasted kumquats? Probably Amandy didn't know what kumquats were, or Blair, or maybe, even father. It was not likely that gypsies who ate such delicacies would want anything from Twin Farms!

She could not talk to Blair until she'd wiped dishes for Amandy. That done she had a moment's terror that Amandy might tell her to mix the bread for rising. But Amandy didn't. So she took her first opportunity to slip away to find Blair in the barns. She thought Blair would be there waiting for her.

Blair was there, but he was helping Jerry milk. And Blair did not like it. His face was heavy with distaste. Jerry had been in the fields all day and was cross, too. Martha had to sit on an old stool and listen to the two wrangle when all the while she was aching with her great news.

But at last she and Blair were alone in the great shadowy barn. Jerry and father were out of hearing. She could see them walking toward the orchard. She motioned to Blair to sit down beside her on the tongue of the wagon.

"Blair, I've seen the gypsies." Her voice caught in her excitement.

"Huh! Is that all?" But Blair knew it wasn't.

"Blair, I've—I've talked with them. I—I ate with them. I—they called it tea. We had tea—and kumquats."

Now Blair was as excited as she could want. "Go on—honest? Ate with them? Where? Did'ya see the funny house on wheels?"

Martha had difficulty shaping articulate words. "Yes. I was inside it."

"Well, go on. What you waiting for? What was it like?"

But Martha hesitated. From even this closest of pals she must have some word that would promise secrecy.

"Blair Bradshaw, will you promise you won't tell? Cross your heart?"

Blair promptly crossed his heart. "Where'd you see them? Did they try to kidnap you?"

Martha almost wished she could say they had. But she admitted that they hadn't. "They're—different gypsies. They're—well, they're not dirty at all. And they're only two of them. A man and a girl. I don't believe they'd steal anything. They are staying up at the Hermit's Cabin." Then she told of her search through the woods for Nelly Howe and Miss Everett and going to the Hermit's Cabin to see if they were there. And instead she'd found the gypsy house on wheels. And the gypsies had invited her to stay to tea.

"Tea?" snorted Blair, unbelieving.

"Yes. Tea," repeated Martha, grandly. She never had had "tea" with anyone in her life, she hadn't

known anything about having "tea" with anyone. Sometimes when one of the neighbors dropped in Amandy or Aunt Judith brewed some strong tea and set cakes or slices of bread and butter out on the kitchen table and invited the neighbor to "set down and have a snack," but to have tea from pretty little cups at a tiny table covered with a flowered cloth was a brand-new experience to Martha and one of which she was justly proud. She told Blair of the little table that unfolded and of the pretty dishes the girl had taken from a box and of the flaky biscuits the gypsy man had made all in a twinkling over the fire and of the kumquats—the delicious kumquats.

"Say, you're not spoofing me, are you?" Blair demanded, suspiciously, and it was Martha's turn to cross her heart which she did, indignantly.

"They have names—just like we have. Only they're prettier," she added. "The man called the girl 'Willa,' and the girl called the man 'Demy,' and the girl's his daughter, I guess, though she didn't call him father once."

"What was the house like? That's what I want to know."

"It was just like a doll's house. Oh, it was darling!" Enthusiastically Martha described the little house on wheels in every detail—and few details of it had escaped her eyes. It was one room. And it was furnished like a real room in a real house; small rugs, two wicker chairs and a little footstool with cushions of some material all splashed with flowers and birds

and of every color, a little table and a book-shelf filled with books. There was a tiny stove that burned with electricity, and there were electric lights in lanterns that swung from the ceiling. And there were real curtains at the tiny windows—all frilled. And pictures. And Willa had told her that their beds opened out of the wall and that at night they drew a curtain across the room and made two rooms. And there was a place where they could wash—Willa had washed her hands after she opened the bottle of kumquats, washed them with some soap that smelled of flowers and dried them on an embroidered towel. Martha's voice piped high with excitement. And she told of the tiny veranda in the back and the green door and the flower boxes.

"What did they wear?" Blair's voice was incredulous.

Martha wished she could say they looked more like the gypsies that had come to Greenbury before. She made the most of the scarlet kerchief the man had worn about his neck. And Willa had worn a sash. And the man had black eyes and hair and a black mustache. But they hadn't worn any beads or rings in their ears or bangles on their hair.

"I told you they were a different kind of gypsies," Martha reiterated. "Sort of gentlemanly gypsies." She hesitated. She had not intended telling Blair about Demy's beautiful hands or the soft quality of his and Willa's voices—that sound that made her think of velvet. She did not tell Blair such things, for Blair,

always laughed. But now she must. "Demy, the man, had beautiful strong white hands."

"Aw—they're not gypsies at all. Just some folks from the city come camping," cried Blair, in great disgust.

That was exactly the conviction that hammered at Martha's common sense. She had had to cling desperately to her belief that these two were gypsies, but different gypsies.

"If they were campers wouldn't they let everybody know they were? Wouldn't they go to the post-office for their mail like those people did who were camping over on Knapp's meadow? And has anyone seen them in the village? Wouldn't they have asked me who I was and where I lived and would I come again? And they didn't." The man had called her "little Miss-of-the Woods" and Willa had been very nice, but she hadn't even hinted that she'd like to have her come again to the Hermit's Cabin. And would campers be likely to stay up there, so far away from everything and where old Abner Joslyn's ghost came at night and sat on the doorstep? Oh, no, they were far too mysterious to be just campers.

"Well, I'm going to find out about them."

"Blair, you promised!" cried Martha in alarm.

That was true. Blair considered. "Well, then you've got to take me 'round there. A boy can always puzzle things out better'n a girl can. You were so taken with all the fixings in the house. I want to see how it's built and what kind of an engine it has. I

guess we can go to Hermit's Cabin if we want to, same's we always have gone. They don't own it."

"But Jasper Towney does—"

"Oh, it's on his land, but he's never seemed to own it—it sort of belongs to everybody. You've got to take me there, to-morrow."

Martha was deeply distressed. She seldom hesitated to obey Blair's smallest request, but she shrank from intruding upon the strangers—be they gypsies or not. On another visit she might not find such a pleasant reception. And on another occasion she might not escape without awkward mishap on her part—it had been only by clinging to its fragile handle that she'd missed letting her cup of tea slide off the thin plate into her lap.

On the other hand she wanted Blair to know what these gypsies were like; their secret could not be enjoyed while Blair doubted any of what she had told him. And she knew he doubted. She might go with him just once, go as far as the edge of the wood.

"We'll go to-morrow afternoon. It's Saturday," declared Blair in a tone that settled things.

Martha went back to the house. From the kitchen door she observed that the bread dough was mixed and in the covered pan back of the stove and that the kitchen was empty. Amandy had gone over to some neighbor's. Martha decided she'd sit on the porch step just a little while and go over again the experiences of the afternoon. After all, whether or not she met with

a kindly reception, she was glad Blair was making her go again to the gypsy stronghold.

Suddenly she saw a tall figure emerge out of the gathering dusk. It was too tall for Blair or Jerry, too slender for father—why, it wore a scarlet kerchief! It was the gypsy man. Demy! She sprang to her feet. And as she did so the man spied her and came forward toward the porch.

"Good evening!" Well, he *was* a gentlemanly gypsy! Then he recognized her. "Why, if it isn't my little girl-of-the-woods! Then you don't live in the hollow tree after all. I have stopped to ask a favor."

Martha had not said anything but an "oh" and she had not been conscious of saying that. The man went on:

"I'm lost. Isn't that ridiculous? I haven't the vaguest idea how to get back to Willa. And she'll be growing anxious. I've tramped through many a wilderness, but I never have found anything so confusing as this corner of the earth or so disconcerting, with its 'No trespassing' signs. Am I on forbidden ground now?" He laughed as he asked it and his voice sounded more velvety than ever.

Involuntarily Martha's glance had shifted toward the barn and again to the door behind her. The man must have guessed her unease. She colored and answered a bit stiffly. "This is Twin Farms." Then she added quickly: "If you go down past the barn there you'll find a lane and if you go down that and around the little pond at the end of the pasture, it'll

take you into the wood road. And follow that and you'll come out by the ridge woods. And go through that and you'll come out by the Hermit's Cabin. That's where your camp is." She did not want him to think she was frightened but, oh, she *did* wish he'd go before father or Jerry or Amandy came back. "You'd better hurry. It's quite a long ways and—and—it'll be dark." That sounded rude to Martha, after the gracious hospitality that had been shown her in the afternoon. "I'll go with you as far as the pond," she offered, moving toward the barn.

"That is very kind of you, little Miss-of-Twin Farms," the man answered, striding beside Martha. But Martha scarcely heard him. She was praying desperately that father and Jerry might have gone down through the orchard to the Miles house. That was a reasonable hope for father was beginning to dicker with Freeman Miles about buying the adjoining pasture land. If she could get past the barn unobserved she was safe—or Demy was safe. There was nothing unusual in people cutting through the lane to the wood road.

Her long legs skimmed over the rough ground. But once beyond the barn she slackened her gait and drew a breath of relief. She ventured a sidewise glance at her companion. He looked even taller than he had in the afternoon. He was bareheaded and his thick black hair and the scarlet kerchief knotted about his throat emphasized the whiteness of his face. He walked with his head lifted and his shoulders flung back. The men

around Greenbury did not walk like that. "He looks like a prince," Martha thought with a quick breath.

They had reached the pond. Martha pointed to the bars at the end of the lane. "There's the road. Be sure and put the bars back." She glanced at his moccasined feet. "Maybe the road's too muddy."

"I am accustomed to mud," he answered, with the laugh in his voice. "Can you give me any other landmark to help me on my way?"

"Yes—there's an old shed just before you come to the woods and the roof's fallen in."

"Splendid. I cannot miss that. I am tremendously grateful to you. Will you come again and visit us and make sure of my safe return?"

Martha gasped in her delight. "Oh, I'd love to. And can I bring my brother?" She blushed at her daring.

"Willa and I had promised ourselves to let no one into our retreat, but I think we'll be happy to make an exception—for you—and your brother. Will you come to-morrow? For tea?"

Oh, it was turning out so beautifully! To-morrow—just as Blair wanted. Martha raced back to the house. There was a light in the kitchen. Amandy had come back. And father and Jerry were coming up through the orchard from the Miles farm. She could hear Blair whistling down at the hen house.

She ran out to the chicken yard to meet him. "Blair, I saw him again! The man. The gypsy man. Mr. Demy. He was lost. He stopped here for some-

one to tell him how to get back. I took him down as far as the pond."

"Did father see you?"

"No-o. But he's nice, Blair. He—he looks like a prince."

Blair snorted. "Prince! You're crazy, Mart. But I'm going to see that house."

"Of course you are. He invited us to come over to-morrow—just as you wanted to, Blair."

"Well, you'd better keep mum about it or father'll tell us not to go. If father knew the fellow'd been around here he'd have the sheriff after him. Guess I'll go back and make sure the hen house is locked."

"Oh, *Blair.*" Martha turned back toward the house. She wished Blair had not spoken of the stranger as a "fellow."

It was Friday night, therefore Martha had no lessons. She went to bed early because so doing would bring to-morrow that much sooner. But so excited was she that she lay in her bed for a long time, wide-eyed. She planned what she'd wear when she went to tea the next day at the funny house on wheels. She'd like to wear her best dress only Amandy would demand some explanation if she appeared in it on an ordinary Saturday afternoon. But she could wear last year's best dress —and her good shoes. Amandy might not notice the shoes. But she sighed deeply. Even in her last year's best dress and her good shoes she'd look clumsy and poorly dressed beside Willa's grace.

She slept finally and dreamed of rocking over a

rough road in the little house on wheels, the pictures and chairs and tables crashing about her, and Mr. Demy smiling as though it did not matter. She wakened suddenly, wide-awake, and lay very still, the better to hear some sound that had roused her. Had it been a door shutting somewhere? Or something dropping? She did not know. She listened intently. Why, it must have been a part of her dream. Oh, wasn't it almost morning? She slipped out of bed and tiptoed to the window to see if it were not almost dawn.

In the east a faint color lightened the sky. The hills were still only great blotches of dusky purple, the near-by barns were blurs of shadow. And as Martha stood there looking out she saw the bent, sulking figure of a man disappear around the barn. Or did she see it? It happened so quickly and her eyes were so heavy with sleep that she blinked them to make sure, and when she looked again the apparition was gone.

"Maybe it was a dog," she said to herself as she jumped back into bed. But she wished Blair had not gone back to the hen house to see if it were locked! It made her think things that she did not want to think.

CHAPTER VI

ON SUNSET REST

FIVE times the next morning Amandy declared it was going to rain, she felt it in her bunions, and five times poor Martha suffered sharpest apprehensions. Did one go to tea in the rain? And if one went could one wear one's best shoes? But three o'clock came and the sun was bright and the sky blue and Martha and Blair set forth, Martha in her "second-best dress" and the new shoes.

Blair's only preparation for the afternoon had been a casual washing of his face and hands. Martha eyed his everyday clothes a little doubtfully. Blair was affecting a grand indifference to the social character of their visit. He was just going to see that house on wheels, that was his only reason for going. Ted Deming had wanted him to drive to Middletown. Maybe he'd get back in time to go with Ted.

"Oh, Blair, they have the cutest cups. They have little Chinese figures on them."

"Rats. Who cares—"

"And plates like them. And cunning folding chairs. Only Mr. Demy sits on the ground. But Willa doesn't. And she pours the tea just like a duchess—"

"Dumbell. I s'pose you think I'm going to be awfully impressed. I'm going to sneak a look at that

engine. Should think it'd have to be a mighty big one to pull a whole house."

"But the house is tiny—like a doll's house. Just one room. Blair, what ought we to say when we get there?"

"Say? Why, what would you say when you get anywhere you're going?"

"I mean—this is different from going anywhere else, Blair. Should we say 'how-do-you-do' or 'I'm pleased to come'?"

Blair laughed uproariously. "Guess it won't matter what we say. What you fussing so about it?"

"It does matter and you'll find out, Blair Bradshaw. And I hope you behave yourself," Martha added, indignantly. "Don't forget that I got this invitation for you. I guess I know as well as you do that you have never been out to tea in your life and you *are* going to be impressed. So there."

Blair snorted in derision. "By a couple of people no one knows anything about? Not me!"

But Martha had the satisfaction of seeing Blair very much impressed. That was later, however.

Mr. Demy and Willa met them in the wood. Willa was carrying an armful of small ferns. Mr. Demy wore the scarlet kerchief knotted about the collar of his khaki shirt. Martha did not have to search for proper words of greeting; Mr. Demy's and Willa's own gay salutes covered her moment's awkwardness. "Didn't they seem glad to see us?" she asked Blair, afterward, as they talked over the afternoon.

Mr. Demy had been afraid it might rain, too. "But we would have had our party, anyway, little Miss-of-Twin-Farms. And this is your brother? Blair? A fine name. Very nice in you to come along, my boy, and bear me support with these two young ladies." They had reached the edge of the wood as he said this and the little house on wheels was plainly in view. "What do you think of our house-wagon, young man?"

Blair's eyes were round and bright. "Say, that's great," he cried. And at once Mr. Demy answered: "Let me show you the mechanism. You're doubtless interested in that. We'll let the girls chatter by themselves."

"Why, he guessed right away that that was what I wanted to see," Blair said, afterward, as they talked of the afternoon.

"Father's going to make cheese delights for us," Willa confided to Martha. "He makes delicious delights. He loves to fuss over things like that."

"I don't know what cheese delights are," Martha confessed, but without the slightest embarrassment. It was to be expected that Mr. Demy would cook something she had never tasted. Willa explained the "delights." They were really only cheese and bread crisped in butter. Martha was a little disappointed that they were only cheese and bread. Amandy made cheese sandwiches often for supper. But these must taste differently from Amandy's, she assured herself.

"Will you help me get things ready?" Willa asked,

and Martha in her joy found herself utterly without voice to assent. To maybe handle the little cups, to take them out of the tiny cupboard! She followed Willa into the little house.

Willa chattered easily. Listening, Martha thought of music. She had never thought of music when she listened to anyone else talk. Sometimes she became so busy thinking how much like music Willa's voice sounded that she did not take in what Willa said. First Willa arranged the ferns in a glass bowl. Then she began cutting slices of bread into little squares and circles. Amandy didn't do that. "You may shred the cheese," she told Martha. Amandy did not do that, either. Willa put into her hands a doll-size utensil and explained how it would shred the cheese if Martha turned the handle. It was all like play. Martha, shredding the cheese, began to feel at home in the little house, with Willa. She began to chatter, too.

From outside she could hear Mr. Demy and Blair talking—rather hear Mr. Demy talking. The two had been standing over the engine, but now Mr. Demy had closed the hood of the engine and was explaining how he made ice for their use from the electric mechanism of the car. His deep, rich voice went on and on. Occasionally it lifted in a question. But it never waited for Blair's answer. Perhaps Blair couldn't answer. Perhaps he was as voiceless as she had been—before she began to feel at home.

Then she saw Mr. Demy and Blair out on the rocks where Mr. Demy had made a fireplace. They were

starting a fire. "Everything ready?" Mr. Demy called to the girls. Willa ran to the door. "Everything's ready," she answered.

She and Martha carried out the cheese sandwiches, ready for cooking. Then they went back to the little house. "Will you get the cups and plates, Martha, please?" asked Willa and Martha trembled from sheer joy. She opened the little cupboard and took down the cups from their hooks, took them down slowly, one by one. She held one up to the light. Why, she could almost see through it! It was like glass and yet it wasn't.

Willa carried out the little table and some fresh linen. She spread a cloth into which were woven flowers of every color of the rainbow. The napkins had flowers in the corners. From the fireplace came the crackle of flame. Mr. Demy was putting the sandwiches over a grill.

Martha looked at Blair and enjoyed a moment's triumph. Poor Blair was standing awkwardly at one side, looking from the pretty table to Willa and then to Mr. Demy and the fire. Over his face had mounted a flush of embarrassment. He was thrusting his hands deep into his pockets, taking them out again, thrusting them back. He did not look at all like the boy who had retorted scornfully to Martha that *he* wouldn't be impressed by a couple of strangers, not he!

The tea party ready, they sat down around the table. Willa and Martha sat on the little stools. Mr. Demy threw himself down on the ground and Blair

followed his example. The " delights " were very good and the cheer of the hot tea, with its slices of lemon and taste of spice, loosened a flow of lazy talk. Part of it was about the " delights "—how good they tasted and was it the way they were cooked that made them taste so good, or eating them out of doors? Willa declared it was the way the bread was cut. Mr. Demy said it was the magic of the open fire. As they watched the spiral of smoke curl off against the blue of the sky he told of open fires on other open hearths—and their magic. In his slow deep voice he made the others *feel* the magic. He told of sitting all one night around a fire in the foothills of the Himalayas when he and two companions and a native guide had become separated from the rest of their party; he told of fires on open mesas in Arizona and in the snow-bound fastnesses of the great silent mountains of Alaska.

" Why, you've been all over! " cried Martha, with a little catch of her breath. Now Blair was sitting forward, his hands clasped tight between his knees, his eyes hard on Mr. Demy's face. He looked at no one but Mr. Demy.

From open fires and their magic, the talk drifted to sunsets. Mr. Demy repeated some lines of poetry. But he repeated them so softly that it seemed as though he breathed them. He had named their camping ground Sunset Rest. He didn't like the Hermit's Cabin, he said. " It's—what do you call it—spooky? " And the sunsets were glorious. " They

bathe us in color. It's like a blessing on us—and a promise for a new day."

"I like to think that the sun is going on shining just the same somewhere," put in Willa.

"Little wonder that there were once sun-worshippers. Perhaps their wisdom was greater than ours, if it was more primitive."

Willa ran into the little house and came out with a book. It was about the sun-worshippers. She put it into her father's hands. "Read some of it, Demy. You know—the part I like." Mr. Demy turned to Blair. "Are you interested, my boy?" he asked. Blair flushed a deeper red and muttered an assent. If Mr. Demy had read something in a Hindu tongue he would have been enthralled.

Martha did not care about the sun-worshippers, so she watched Willa instead. Willa wore knickers and a scarlet sweater over a silk blouse. On her feet were leather mocassins such as Mr. Demy wore. A scarlet band held back her soft dark hair. As she sat there on her stool, her slender body very straight, her face alert with her interest in the book she had given to her father, Martha thought her the most beautiful girl she had ever seen. She looked reflectively down at her own freckled stubby hands in the lap of the second-best dress and sighed very faintly. But then, if her freckled hands were slender and white like Willa's and her garments soft and silky like Willa's, she would not derive this keen satisfaction she felt in Willa's perfections.

All at once Blair muttered that it was "getting late." Into their happy hour flashed the realization of chores waiting at home. If they were late they would be put to an account of their whereabouts. He scrambled to his feet and Martha sprang to hers.

"Will you come again, my boy?" asked Mr. Demy, putting the book aside. "Of course I know Miss Martha will. Willa will give us no peace unless she does. And I am afraid my Willa is very spoiled—she has a way of getting her way."

"Oh, may I? As often as ever I can?" cried Martha. "I love to come here. It's so—different. It's like being right in a story."

Mr. Demy and Willa both laughed at her and Martha laughed, too. She was too happy to mind their laughing at her. And suddenly Blair found straight-forward speech.

"I'd like to come real often. I like to hear you talk—it makes a fellow see things he never saw before."

"Then that's a bargain." Mr. Demy held out his hand to Blair exactly as though Blair were a man, like himself. And Blair pulled his hand out of his pocket and extended it. His wrist was streaked with blood.

"What's this?" exclaimed Mr. Demy.

"Oh, nothing. Just a scratch. I guess I scratched it on that firewood."

But Mr. Demy turned his hand over and examined the mere scratch. "Wait just a moment." He went into the house and reappeared with a bottle, some cotton and a white handkerchief. He dabbed the

wound with a strong smelling antiseptic, then wrapped it in the handkerchief.

"Oh, it's nothing," protested Blair, flushing red. But his eyes watched Mr. Demy's hands with great fascination.

"Possibly it's nothing—but we'll take no chances. After a bit take off the handkerchief. Throw it away. It's old."

Mr. Demy and Willa walked through the wood with them. "Remember, come again soon!" they called as they turned back.

Martha and Blair walked for a little way in a deep silence. Blair held his injured wrist stiffly and furtively fingered the white wrapping. After awhile he said softly: "Gee! He's great."

"So's Willa," asserted Martha, speaking softly, too.

"They're not gypsies at all."

"Who said they were?"

"Well, you said they were sort of nice gypsies. They're not *any* sort. I'll bet there isn't anyone that's like Mr. Demy." Blair had never suffered hero-worship before. It came over him now like a wave of fever. It loosed his tongue, but he found speech inadequate to express his feelings.

"He knows everything, I guess. He's been everywhere. And say, but he makes a fellow feel as though he was somebody!"

"Don't they, though? That's just the way Willa acts, too."

"Not a bit of a smart-Aleck. And he could be one, too—and it'd be all right."

"Did you notice his hands, Blair?"

"I'll say I did. I wonder what he does with them. I'll bet he does something great."

"Maybe he's an artist."

Blair did not want Mr. Demy to be an artist. One summer an artist had lived in the village—he had worn his hair long and smocks like a girl. Blair hadn't thought much of him. "Oh, he's not any of your sissy artists. He's not that kind."

Martha felt that Blair's excess of admiration was shutting out Willa. She began to sing Willa's praises. Willa was so polite, but no, it was something more than politeness. It was just natural sweetness.

They knew what they wanted to say but they did not know just how to say it. Martha "bet" that Willa couldn't be anything but sweet if she tried. And had Blair noticed that when Willa talked, it was just like music? Blair had not, but he did not laugh. Instead, he said: "I could listen to Mr. Demy talk all day."

They walked fast and talked fast, groping in headlong fashion for words. They both were stimulated by mental refreshment, but they did not know why. In Greenbury, when folks gathered together, they talked usually of people and Mr. Demy and Willa had talked of things. Even when the talk at Twin Farms was on the crops, it was always on the crops as affecting the household at Twin Farms or the neighboring farmers. Martha and Blair had never heard anyone

talk of the magic of open fires or sunsets. Martha had put it truly when she said she felt as though she were living in the pages of a story.

But when the peaks of the Twin Farms barns came into view over the meadows Martha's rapture steadied. She frowned a little.

"Ought we to tell where we've been?" she asked Blair, troubled.

Blair hesitated. He knew what would happen if they told. Martha suspected, too. No one at Twin Farms who had not seen Mr. Demy and Willa, had not *heard* them, could be made to understand what they were really like. There would be questions. Not many from father—it was enough for father that these two were strangers, in Greenbury without any avowed purpose; Blair, scowling heavily, was thinking that he couldn't bear hearing what father would have to say. Martha was thinking that she couldn't bear Amandy's prying, snooping questions, Amandy's sniffing, Amandy's "loafers."

"I don't see why we have to," Blair finally pronounced. "It isn't doing anything wrong to go and see friends. *We* know they're all right."

"And they want to be left alone," added Martha, begging the point a little, for she knew there was small danger that father or Amandy would intrude upon Sunset Rest.

"And it's their own business why they want to be left alone," Blair defended.

"I'm sure it's a good reason. It couldn't be anything else."

"I'm not even going to say a word to Ted Deming."

"And I'm not going to breathe about them to Nelly Howe." Martha's voice got back its happy ring. "I'm glad to have a secret from Nelly. She's been acting like a pig with Miss Everett—I know she doesn't tell me everything she does with Miss Everett."

"Pooh! You and your Miss Everett. It's like a girl to get crazy over an old-maid school teacher."

Martha had sufficient loyalty left to protest this. "She isn't an old-maid school teacher. She isn't so terribly old, Blair. Nelly and I figured out that she can't be more than thirty."

"I wonder how old Mr. Demy is. He laughs like a kid. I don't believe I ever heard a man laugh as easily as he does."

"And it's never *at* you, Blair. Did you notice? And it makes you laugh. And Willa's like that. Why, Blair, we don't know what their last name is!"

"Well, we'll find out." Blair looked at his wrist. He remembered the handkerchief. He removed it carefully. He did not want to throw it away. It might be old but it was fine and white. He folded it slowly. Suddenly he exclaimed, "Look at this, will you, Mart?"

It was a crest embroidered in a corner of the square of linen. Neither Martha nor Blair ever had seen anything like it. Rachel often had embroidered her initials

on her handkerchiefs and Molly had sent Martha one for Christmas with little wreaths of flowers in each corner. But this was different. It was so finely embroidered that it seemed woven in the linen.

"I'll bet that means something," said Blair, in a low voice. And he put the handkerchief in his pocket.

Martha drew a long breath. "I'm glad Aunt Judith is away," she declared. She could think now on *why* Aunt Judith had gone without a qualm. Anyway, Aunt Judith's letters indicated that she was rather enjoying "doing" for the Pinkertons. Suddenly Martha straightened importantly. "Why, Blair, wasn't it decided in meeting that I was to take Aunt Judith's place? Well, if I were Aunt Judith and decided to have some new friends, nobody would say a word about it, would they?"

Blair did not answer. Perhaps his conscience was not pricking even tiny pricks. He seemed far off in thought and he came back with: "Think, Mart, of hunting tigers in the Himalaya Mountains! I'll say that's going some."

CHAPTER VII

RACHEL

A WEEK after that happy afternoon at Sunset Rest —Martha never thought of it as the Hermit's Cabin now—Rachel came home. Before that memorable Saturday Martha would have been glad. But almost at once, after she had tried on the promised new dress and the new hat and seen Rachel's new things and heard about Molly, she wondered if Rachel's coming home would make any difference in her own freedom.

She and Blair had made three more visits at the little house on wheels. She and Willa were now "friends." Willa had told her that it made everything much nicer having her for a friend. "Always before when Demy and I have gone away gypsying we didn't see anyone but each other," she had explained. "We get awfully tired of each other, too, sometimes, so it's nice having two friends. I have you and Demy has Blair." She was eager to know all about Martha. Willa thought Twin Farms must be lovely. She made Martha tell twice about how it had been built years and years ago on the very spot on which the first Noah Bradshaw had built his log cabin. She had squinted her pretty eyes into two slits like button holes. "I can *see* it," she had said softly. "That little log cabin and all the forest around it." Martha had suffered a deep pang at not being able to invite Willa to Twin Farms, but Willa had not noticed the omission.

Willa had said little things, now and then, about herself and Martha had treasured each word and repeated them excitedly to Blair in the seclusion of the barn at Twin Farms. She and Blair met now, often, by arrangement, in the shadowy barn, to talk over Mr. Demy and Willa.

"Blair, she's only four months older than I am. Her birthday's in January and mine's in April. And she's never gone to a school in her life, Blair. Her mother's dead—too. She has a governess. She's had her ever since she was a baby. She calls her Lisa. Imagine not going to school!" Martha had to stop to give such an imagining an ecstatic consideration. She rocked on her heels. "Imagine knowing anyone who has a real governess. Girls always hate their governesses in stories but Willa doesn't. She loves her. And Willa goes everywhere with Mr. Demy. They're like brother and sister, aren't they? And they live in New York when they're not going somewhere. Willa doesn't know many girls. That's because—" Again Martha stopped. And now she sat still and straight. "That's a secret. Willa didn't mean to tell but it came out and then it was too late. She was awfully bothered and I told her I wouldn't tell a soul. But that doesn't mean you, Blair. We're sort of partners with Mr. Demy and Willa, you see. Well, she told me she wasn't born in this country! She said she wished she *had* been. She wishes she'd been born right in a place like Greenbury, in a house like ours."

"Humph! She wouldn't wish it if she knew what a stupid dump this is."

"Blair, Twin Farms *isn't* stupid. Mr. Demy thinks it's lovely here. We have mountains. He says every spoken and written word that has lived has had its creation on a mountain top." Martha had quoted Mr. Demy with more pride than exactness.

"Oh, well, it's all right if you don't have to *stay* here," Blair grumbled.

Martha had considered this answer with some concern. It was to recur to her often in the weeks that followed.

At another meeting in the barn Blair told her he had asked Mr. Demy his last name. They'd been talking about names. Did names make people or people make names? Mr. Demy had told of interesting origins of uninteresting names. And Blair had told of a farmer over Manchester way whose name was Hay and who'd named his boy Timothy; it hadn't been until they were christening the child that they'd thought how funny the combination sounded and then it was too late for the minister had pronounced the name. Amandy had brought this story one night to supper. And while he and Mr. Demy were laughing over this Blair had blurted out what at any other time he would not have had the courage to ask. "What's your last name, sir? I don't know." And Mr. Demy had hesitated for quite a little while. "Must I have a name to you, boy? If I must—will Wanders do? It seems—well, appropriate."

"Of course I know that isn't his real name. But it's enough for me. If he has a reason for keeping his real name a secret, I know it's a good reason," Blair declared, stoutly.

"I think it's nicer to have them mysterious," Martha had answered at once. To know a girl who had a governess! And who had to keep her name a secret! Who mustn't even tell that she had not been born in America! She had to pinch herself sometimes to know that she was still Martha Bradshaw, who had lived fifteen years without such thrills. She had to use all her will power to keep her lips sealed when Nelly Howe was especially boastful about confidences with Miss Everett. As though she cared *now* that Miss Everett got letters from a man in Boston.

But by the time Rachel had been home a week Martha realized that Rachel did not look at her often enough to observe telltale signs of anything. In fact she, herself, came to observe betraying changes in Rachel.

Rachel had chattered endlessly about the good times she had had on her visit, of what she and Molly had done together, she had detailed entirely to Amandy's satisfaction how good-for-nothing was Molly's help and how Molly despaired over her, she had told of going to the theatre and movies, learning to play whist and a new dance step. But all at once Martha sensed that Rachel was keeping something back. Rachel was telling the same things over and over, excitedly. There would come to her cheeks two bright pink spots and

her eyes would get a far-away look and her fingers would twist and lock with one another. Before this visit Rachel had never twisted her fingers like that nor had she been given to looking dreamy. And, most significant sign of all, she refused flatly to mention Conger Smith's name! More than once Martha had wanted to ask her if she had seen Conger Smith while she was at Molly's, but she had been afraid to. She did not want Rachel to say she had, when that was what father had not wanted her to do, and she did not want Rachel to say she hadn't, for down in her heart she had nursed the romantic picture of Rachel going to the theatre with Conger Smith, or to a party, wearing her best orchid georgette dress. It was distressing to be so torn and she had not put the question.

It was Blair's practice to bring the mail to Twin Farms on his way from school but each day since Rachel had been home the postmaster had told Blair that his sister had stopped for the mail. When Blair asked her, a little testily: "Say, who gets the mail, you or me? I don't want to bother stopping for it if you're going to get it everyday," Rachel had answered quickly:

"Oh, I like the walk." And Rachel had never cared about walking to the village in the middle of the day before! Martha must have looked her surprise for Rachel had explained hastily, the pink spots on her cheeks deepening: "Goodness, I have to do *something.*" And then father had shot her such a quick accusing glance that Martha had begun at once telling

about the mouse that Joe Gregg had put in Milly Elliott's desk.

Martha pondered these signs, with a mixture of unease and excitement. Perhaps Rachel was in love—and if she were, and in love with Conger Smith, father was certain to be angry. Martha ventured to ask Amandy if she thought Rachel was any different since she had been in Northampton. Amandy was not in the best of humor so she had answered promptly: "Oh, she's snippier. I guess that's the only difference. And a little work'll take that out of her." If Amandy had not been in a bad humor, owing to her bunions again foretelling rain, Martha might have gone further and asked her if she thought Rachel acted the least bit as though she were in love. But Martha did not. And she could not ask Nelly Howe because there was existing now a slight coldness between the two over Nelly's bragging about having a secret with Miss Everett. She could not ask Blair because Blair was a boy and would not know anything about it. She could not ask Willa. Willa did not know Rachel.

A few days later her suspicions were brought to a quick head. Examinations had begun at school and Miss Everett had passed Martha in English on her term's work so that Martha found a half-holiday. She returned home at noon when no one expected her. Amandy was out in the garden. Martha walked into the kitchen and put her books down on to the table. Then she stepped through into the sitting-room. At the threshold of the door she stopped abruptly. Rachel

was standing at the window reading a letter. It was not that fact so much as the glow on Rachel's face that brought Martha to a halt. And when suddenly Rachel, realizing that someone stood in the door, lifted her head with a startled jerk and put the letter behind her, Martha *knew*.

"Rachel, is it from Con Smith?" she asked breathlessly, as though she had known all the time that Rachel had been going to the post-office for this letter. Her tone was glad, too. The part of her that wanted Rachel to have this romance was uppermost. She went swiftly to Rachel's side.

Rachel hesitated. She still held the letter behind her. But the girl was hungry to talk to someone. She nodded, her eyes starry.

"Yes."

"Rachel—are you in love?" Martha whispered it from sheer excitement.

Rachel's face took on the glow of a deep red rose in the sunlight.

"Oh, Mart, you're so silly!" Then she put her fingers to her lips. "Sh-h," she warned, nodding her head toward the kitchen door. "Amandy's got ears like a mule."

"Rachel, did you see Con Smith while you were at Molly's?"

"Did I!" Rachel hugged the letter to her heart. "Almost every day, Mart. Oh, we had such fun. Molly thinks he's awfully nice. She said she never

imagined he'd grow up to be so nice. And Foster liked him, too. We went around together a lot."

"To the theatre?"

"Yes, ever so many times."

Martha digested this with a rapturous breath.

"To any of the parties? Did you wear your orchid georgette?"

"What else would I wear when it is the only good thing I have? Two or three times Molly let me wear one of her dresses. Molly's got an awfully jolly crowd. They know how to have a good time. And they took Con and me right in, as though they'd known us always. One of the girls is terribly pretty, but Con said he liked my style a lot better." She ended on a little note of triumph. "He wrote that in his letter. I guess he knew I was jealous of Sue Love."

"Of course he'd like your style better," Martha exulted, too. She looked greedily at the letter and Rachel, seeing her glance, opened the first page enough for Martha to see the heading, "Dearest Ray." Rachel glowed with happy consciousness. Martha gasped.

"Rachel, are you—are you—engaged?"

Rachel did not answer her directly nor did she look at her. "Goose, Con is not earning much more than enough to buy his clothes. But he will in a little while. He says his uncle has promised him a raise in three months. Then he's going to buy a car. He likes working for his uncle. He says there isn't anything would make him come back to this old hole."

Martha winced. All at once something spoiled the

joyousness of Rachel's confidences. She thought of father. She wanted to protest against Rachel calling Greenbury a "hole." And Twin Farms! What was it Mr. Demy had called Twin Farms? A mothering roof. She didn't exactly understand what Mr. Demy had meant when he said it, but it had had a lovely sound. Only she couldn't tell Rachel without telling about Mr. Demy.

Rachel must have felt the change in Martha's mood. She folded the letter and put it in her pocket and faced Martha.

"Now don't you go and tell everyone about Con and me, Mart. Maybe I was foolish to tell you."

"But, Rachel, hadn't you ought to tell father?"

"Tell him—what? That Con and I are awfully good friends?"

"Father didn't want you to see Con. He as good as said so when he let you go."

"He didn't *say* so. Just as good as saying a thing isn't the same as saying it. Anyway, I have a right to choose my friends, haven't I?"

Martha, with secret friends of her own, had to agree to that.

"Father makes me tired," Rachel pursued, irritably. "He liked Con all right until Con went away from here. Father makes it a crime to go away from this valley. It's his complex."

Martha did not know what a "complex" was. Evidently it was a word Rachel had acquired during

her visit with Molly. But Martha did not like Rachel saying that father made her "tired."

"You shouldn't talk like that, Rachel," she reproved.

Rachel laughed. Her laugh had a shrill edge.

"I shouldn't, Miss Prim? Please recognize that I'm grown up. Father cannot go on making us see everything through his eyes, forever. He's tried it with each one of us—and he hasn't succeeded very well. What if Joan and Molly had stayed here? And Roger and Dick? A nice household we'd have! Joan and Molly old maids—like Amandy, and Roger and Dick going around like old men and nothing ahead of them in their lives but work, work, work, the same thing over and over, the same people, saying the same stupid things. I'd hate to see them like that. And, oh, I hate to think of myself, maybe, being like that." She shivered in the intenseness of her feeling. "I'd do anything—marry *anybody*—to escape it."

Martha was frankly frightened. She had never heard Rachel use that tone of voice. She began to feel sorry for Rachel—if Rachel really felt like that. For herself she wouldn't mind staying at Twin Farms forever and she was certain she'd think the same when she was "grown up" like Rachel. There were quite a few old maids in Greenbury and they always seemed to have a good time at the various social affairs in the valley and she didn't think she'd mind being an old maid. In fact, she'd rather be one. But poor Rachel

couldn't help it if she didn't look upon the future in the same way. Only—Martha couldn't help thinking of father and father's hurt-anger. She wished Rachel hadn't told her.

"I won't tell a soul, Rachel," she promised, soothingly, speaking as though Rachel were in deep trouble instead of being in love. And Rachel's answer, a little unkind, "You'd just better not," sealed her promise effectively.

Of course Martha had planned spending her unexpected holiday going to Sunset Rest. She had told herself that she'd tie up the neglected sweet pea vines very rapidly so as to go early. Now she wondered if perhaps she ought not to stay with Rachel. After the noon meal she asked Rachel what she was going to do during the afternoon.

Rachel answered indifferently: "Oh, sew a little. And write some letters. And maybe I'll go down to see Sally Mann." But her glance said plainly: "I don't want you hanging around me."

Martha tried to feel hurt as she tied up the sweet pea vines but in the glad sunshine of the June day and with the prospect of two hours at Sunset Rest ahead of her it was not easy. She finished her self-imposed task, then put her head into the kitchen door.

"Is there anything you want me to do, now, Amandy?"

Amandy's bunions were easier and her temper sweeter. "No, go along and play. Guess if there's

any chores lyin' round waitin' it won't hurt Rachel to do 'em."

Martha raced off, around the barn, through the meadow, down the wood road. Behind her she left Rachel's bothersome confidences. The little furrow on her freckled brow smoothed magically. Once more her world swung untroubled on its axis. Willa had said when she came again they'd make candy.

CHAPTER VIII

"FURRINERS"

EACH spring an entertainment marked the close of the Greenbury school. Declamations were given by boys and girls of the upper grades, "pieces" were spoken by the younger children. Maribel Saunders sang selections appropriate to the season and the occasion and the president of the school board, with stereotype preface and his best black tail coat and a crackling boiled shirt, presented the certificates. Greenbury invariably turned out to its last citizen for the event; the village was proud of its school and of its boys and girls. And refreshments were always served after the programme.

Blair, who was to receive his certificate marking the end of all that the Greenbury school could teach him, was on the programme to give a declamation. Martha, sitting between her father and Amandy, read with pride where the printed programme announced that Blair Bradshaw would declame on "Napoleon's Place in History." She had heard Blair rehearse in the barn. He was wonderful. She herself had polished his shoes for the evening—in her affectionate pride she could not trust him to do it well enough. Her own name would be read on the honor roll, but the excitement of that faded beside Blair's distinction. And mingled with her pride were pricks of apprehension. What if

Blair forgot a line, or his collar *did* choke him, as he had said it might!

No apprehensions marred Amandy's pleasure. Amandy had not even read her programme. She watched the audience file in, avid for something new on somebody's back, for a strange face, or to find someone missing. Her eyes were darting from the door to the corners of the room, in one of which Rachel's set was gathering, then back to the door, down to the front seats. Nothing escaped them.

Nelly Howe came in, importantly, with Miss Everett. She wore a pretty white dress. "Will you look at the fussing on that get-up of Nelly Howe's," Amandy breathed to Martha. Martha thought it a pretty dress. But Nelly Howe had not told her she was getting it. Beside it her own dress, the one Rachel had brought her, looked too plain for this occasion. And there was something disturbingly "smarty" in Nelly's intimacy with Miss Everett.

Next to Martha her father was breathing deeply. Now and then he took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead. Martha, peeping at him, hoped he wouldn't go to sleep. He had gone to sleep the year before. But then there had been no Bradshaw on the programme.

Amandy's head stopped its pivoting as much as to say, "There. Everybody's here." And almost at once the president of the school board stepped up upon the platform, put down upon the desk the basket that

contained the certificates, each rolled and tied with white ribbon, and cleared his throat.

A very little girl in a very starched dress and squeaky shoes lisped through "The Children's Hour."

"Now ain't that pretty," said Amandy loudly, when she had finished. Martha wished Amandy wouldn't talk so loudly—she felt eyes turning toward them. Another child in her turn valiantly began: "We were crowded in the cabin. Not a soul would dare to sleep—"

"Now *wouldn't* you 'a supposed her ma would 'a fixed her petticoats so they didn't show?" offered Amandy in such an audible whisper that someone tittered behind her. Martha's cheeks burned. She gave Amandy an imploring sign that was lost upon her, for now Amandy's interest was given entirely to the fate of the Captain's daughter. "'We are lost,' the Captain shouted." "Now ain't that sad?"

When Maribel Saunders fluttered to the platform, her skirts swirling about her as though they were conscious of the high moment, Amandy nodded her approval. "I like to hear that woman sing. She don't sing through her nose or swallow the tails of her words like a lot of these singers." She settled back in her seat to enjoy Maribel's clear soprano. Maribel sang something about the flowers in spring. Amandy clapped loudly. "That was real sweet. Don't know as a canary could beat her. Wished she sung a hymn like she sang at Easter time, though. Mebbe she will now."

But Maribel sang something about ships sailing out

to sea and Amandy did not clap again. With a sigh she resigned herself to waiting until another Easter rolled around. To Martha's relief she subsided into a temporary quiet.

The programme announced that Miss Mary Sykes would read from "As You Like It." Mary was in Martha's class. But Martha had not seen her come into the room. There was a little pause after Maribel Saunders bowed herself off the platform. Then the president of the school board rose and said that unfortunately Miss Mary had been taken sick with whooping cough and so would not be able to be present, but that in her place Miss Nelly Howe would give a reading. A little stir ran through the audience. Necks craned. And Nelly Howe got up from her seat next to Miss Everett and walked to the platform.

"*That's* why she's rigged out!" said Amandy. Martha felt the color rush to her face and as quickly ebb from it. Nelly hadn't told her she was going to substitute for Mary Sykes!

Nelly read very creditably. Her new dress was very pretty. Attention was fairly divided between taking in what she said and what she wore.

"If Jennie Howe embroidered that rig herself she must 'a set up nights doing it," someone behind Martha muttered to her companion.

There was general and warm applause for Nelly. Martha clapped vigorously. She was glad Nelly had done so well.

The declamations came last. Ted Deming gave one

on Abraham Lincoln. Minnie Baggs, red in the face and stuttering over her sentences, told the crowded room about the Sons of Vermont. Martha thought her stupid, but she felt her father stir in his seat. And then came Blair's turn.

Martha shut her eyes. She did not dare look at Blair. When Blair began she had a crazy notion that it wasn't Blair——the voice was not Blair's. She felt an icy trickle of perspiration run down her spine. That voice sounded so absurdly not like Blair's that she had to open her eyes a tiny crack.

But it was Blair. And, oh, he looked so handsome! And he was *not* choking. And he was remembering every word and throwing out his arms the way he had practised. She saw Blair a conqueror himself! There was a shine in his eyes she had never seen in them before—as though they were looking beyond the four walls of the schoolroom out into a wide world, challenging it. She became so fascinated by the intentness of his gaze that she turned her own head, almost expecting to see some glowing vision beyond the realities of board and mortar. And there in the back of the room, his head towering a little over everyone, was Mr. Demy! *That* was what had brought that light into Blair's eyes.

She forgot to follow what Blair was saying. Would father notice that Blair had eyes only for that dark head back of the familiar throng? Would anyone else notice that Mr. Demy was there? She was glad when Blair had finished. She sat very still. The audi-

ence was clapping more loudly than it had for anyone else. She was so proud for Blair that she wanted to cry. But she felt an apprehension that seemed out of all proportion to what had happened. Why shouldn't Mr. Demy come? Summer people, the ones who occasionally came to Greenbury for the summer, often took part in the village affairs. It wasn't that Mr. Demy was there—it was that shine that had been in Blair's eyes *because* of Mr. Demy. Blair had done well for him. Martha felt a foreboding of something she could not define.

But it was gone almost at once. Blair had been last on the programme. The president of the school board immediately began giving out the certificates. Everyone was stirring and whispering and applauding. Amandy was giving full vent to her opinions about everyone and everything. After the certificates had been awarded there would be only the singing of "America" by the audience.

As the last verse of the song died away everyone pressed into the aisles. Martha edged her way to where Nelly stood, the centre of an admiring circle of schoolmates. Martha added her congratulations to theirs. And gradually the circle melted away and left them together.

"O, Mart, I've got the grandest news to tell you," Nelly whispered. She clutched Martha's arm. "You'll never guess! I've known for a long time but Miss Everett didn't want me to tell. I'm going home with her for two weeks. I'm going day after to-morrow."

The new dress, the honor of substituting on the evening's programme should be nothing to this! Miss Everett lived just outside of Boston. And she was going home with her to visit, that meant going to Boston!

Nelly was watching Martha's face for the effect of her announcement. But Martha had herself well in hand. Besides, part of her was still thinking of Blair and Mr. Demy. She answered with honest enthusiasm: "Really? What fun!" And there was no sign of the consuming envy that Nelly Howe looked for.

"I wish we both were going, Mart. That'd be more fun, of course. But Miss Everett didn't say anything about your coming, too, and of course I couldn't suggest it."

"Me?" Martha ejaculated. And then she added, promptly: "If she'd *begged* me to go I wouldn't leave Greenbury just now." And, when Nelly stared at her, she added: "There's a reason, but it's a secret. I can't tell you." Then Martha, seeing Blair standing with Rachel and Ted Deming, deliberately left Nelly Howe and joined them.

"Blair, I saw him!" she whispered to Blair.

"He's gone," Blair whispered back. "I went straight to find him. I wanted to thank him for coming. He's been helping me feel what I was talking about."

Martha's heart lightened at once. If Mr. Demy had gone then there was no danger of father meeting him. She threw herself whole heartedly into the con-

sumption of the ice cream and cake. She hung on the fringe of the little crowd that eddied around Blair, she drank in each congratulatory word that was given to Blair. When anyone shook Blair's hand and said: "You were fine, my boy," she tingled to her toes. Blair *had* been fine. And Mr. Demy had come to hear him. She was as glad as Blair about that.

But there had been many there who had observed the tall dark-haired man in the back of the room and wondered why he had come. They talked of it that evening over the ice cream plates, and more the next day. To the unimportant fact that the stranger up at Hermit's Cabin had taken a notion to look in on the school "doin's" was given increasing significance. He hadn't stayed for more than a minute. He'd slipped out as quietly as he'd slipped in. Philemon Baggs went so far as to say to Cy Perkins, in none too quiet a voice, that "like as not he was sizin' up who was there and who wan't and if anything come up missin' in the valley that night folks would know where to look for it." And Philemon's sagacity had had a popular note; others took it up. No, no one thought the stranger came to be friendly.

Greenbury had its own kind of hospitality. Strangers found an instant welcome in its midst when strangers let folks know what they were there for. But these strangers—or this stranger, for no one thought much of the girl, few had set eyes on her—had made it plain that he did not want to be friendly. When anyone encountered him on the village street and

offered the customary "good-morning" or "fine day," he merely nodded in answer. He went into the village store and bought his supplies as briefly and with as few words as possible. He never went to the post-office. He walked fast and with his head in the air as though he were alone on the earth. He wore the absurd red kerchief about his throat and the soft moccasins on his feet and went bareheaded. He'd been at the Hermit's Cabin four weeks now and no one in the valley knew any more about him than they had when he came and that wasn't anything. And Greenbury resented this strongly. In the full flush of the productive season, when crops usually made the topic of any conversation to the exclusion of all else, Greenbury began talking of the stranger, and not kindly.

The village knew he was not a gypsy. But word went about that the stranger and the girl talked in a "furrin" tongue. Jasper Towney himself had heard them and he had told of it. It had sounded like "Eyetalian" only it was worse, Jasper had said. And to Greenbury "furriners" were in the class with gypsies. Few ever came to the valley and the village never had learned to think of them as anything but alien to its peace and prosperity. Now the rumor swept the length and breadth of the valley that the two at Hermit's Cabin were "furriners."

Amandy brought it to Twin Farms, of course. She had "took leave," as she put it, between canning strawberries and raspberries and had gone to some "doin's" at her Lodge and had come back stocked to

the maximum capacity with news. And liking a good audience, she kept the best of it for the dinner hour.

"Them folks up at Hermit's Cabin is furriners," she said, and waited for the full effect of her announcement. Blair dropped a knife with a clatter and Martha's eyes hung in a moment's fright on the plate before her.

"Furriners as sure as preachin'. They talk queer sometimes. Jasper Towney has heard 'em himself. Everyone in the Lodge was sayin' that they ought 'a be run out of the place before something happens. No use lockin' barn doors after everything's stolen. Cy Perkins said that to the sheriff himself."

Martha felt Blair's eyes turn to her father's face. She felt their angry burning. "O, Blair, be careful," she implored voicelessly. She herself turned all hot and cold. It was horrible not to speak up and defend dear Mr. Demy and Willa, to do nothing to stem Amandy's tongue—

"They say he came into the schoolhouse t'other night. Folks think that's queer and I do myself. He didn't stay, so I don't 'low he was tryin' to be neighborly. But no one's heard of anything comin' up missin'. Wish I'd took notice of him. Sarah Perkins saw him and said he had on that ridiculous get-up. A red sash tied 'round his neck. Good thing he don't go into Freeman's pasture lot with that on. If that ugly bull saw him—"

Suddenly Blair laughed. Martha, venturing to

look at him, saw the shine in his eyes. *He* was not afraid for Mr. Demy. She would not be, either.

And father began to talk about something else so that Amandy was forced into quiet. Father told Rachel that he'd heard they'd hired a young woman from Burlington to take charge of the primary grades. She had just graduated from college. Maybe Rachel would find a nice friend in her.

Rachel met his announcement with little enthusiasm. She didn't care about finding any more friends in Greenbury, her manner said plainly. Martha, on the contrary, thought it very exciting. Two years before she had been tremendously thrilled at Miss Everett's coming. If Rachel were not in love she'd probably be more interested, Martha decided, with a little sigh.

She had no opportunity to talk over with Blair what Amandy had said at the table. Father went out immediately after dinner and took Blair with him. Now Blair was working in the fields, helping father and Jerry. She saw the scowl on Blair's forehead as he followed his father to the barn.

That night Cy Perkins drove up to Twin Farms. Martha, seeing him from the kitchen, took alarm. Perhaps he had come to tell father something about Mr. Demy. The two men sat down on the edge of the kitchen porch. By being very quiet she could hear what they were saying. It was not exactly eavesdropping, because father knew she was in the kitchen. And if Cy Perkins was going to tell some awful untruths

about Mr. Demy she ought to know. She and Blair were Mr. Demy's friends.

But the two men were talking about the problems of a village sewerage system. They talked about the new post-office which was badly needed. The government would find out when it was too late how badly it was needed. Anyone could walk into the shanty that was the present post-office and carry off anything he had a mind to. Burt Allan, the postmaster, had said that more than once. And sometimes he had a lot of money in the cash drawer. There was Peter Myers sending money regularly to his uncle to pay off what he owed him and sometimes it laid all night in the post-office. Martha held her breath as Cy Perkins talked about the money in the post-office drawer, but he did not make any allusions to the strangers in connection with it.

Then father told Cy Perkins to come down with him and see his crop of hay. It was almost ready for cutting. He'd never had his hay ripe as early in the season as this. Everything was crowding—it would be a bumper year.

They walked away together and Martha, watching them, felt her heart lift as though a stone had rolled from it. She was silly, perhaps, to have worried for Mr. Demy's safety. Blair didn't worry. She remembered that fine scorn she had caught in Blair's eyes when he'd laughed at Amandy. Blair knew and she ought to know that they needn't be afraid for anyone like Mr. Demy.

CHAPTER IX

"WHAT IS AN UNDERSTANDING?"

"IF I'D made the world," opined Amandy from the stove, "I'd 'a made strawberries and raspberries in it with something more'n a breathing spell betwixt 'em."

"I wouldn't have put any in the world at all," echoed Martha, forlornly. She sat at a table picking over a great bowl of red berries. She was enveloped in one of Amandy's old aprons and it was streaked with crimson as were her face and her hands. She hated canning time, she hated the rows of jars standing in the steaming water at the back of the stove, she hated the messy concoction in the big kettles, the fruity smell rising from it as Amandy manipulated her spoon. She felt then that she could never swallow one spoonful of the sauce. And where was Rachel? She'd looked over berries all morning and Rachel had done only four quarts.

"That mess you've hulled will fill these cans," Amandy swiftly calculated. "We'll make jam out the rest. There's goin' to be lots of currants this year, too."

In her mind Martha saw the currants, and then the cherries—rows upon rows of jars of cherries. And then the early plums. And the early peaches. And the grapes—

"Whatever do we do with it all?" she asked suddenly as though aware of something colossal in the quantity. "We don't ever *eat* it all, do we?"

"I guess you eat a good sight of it and then there's the donations." Amandy levelled reproving eyes on Martha. "Ain't you got the natural Bradshaw pride in your preserve closet? There never was a time when that didn't groan so loud with good preserves that you could hear it. There wasn't ever anyone in this valley could beat your ma for keepin' the preserve closet filled to the ceiling. And your Aunt Judith's done her duty. That's a woman's job just like it's your pa's job to have the barn and the silo filled. You ought to take a note of such things." Amandy drew her kettle from the fire and walked over to the table where Martha was working. "*You* ought a—because Rachel don't. She wouldn't care if every last berry rotted right under her nose. That girl's goin' to bring disappointment to her pa or my name ain't Amandy Meegs."

"Oh, Amandy!" cried Martha. For Amandy was giving words to her own fear. "Oh, Amandy!"

"Well, she ain't been the same sence she visited down at Molly's. Somethin's put notions in her head and you can't get any chores out of her. I might as well do anything myself as to tell her and then do it after her. Why ain't she here, now, helpin'? I'd like t' know. If her Aunt Judith was to home, I guess she'd be here."

"Maybe—maybe—Rachel is in love," quavered Martha, quick to Rachel's defence. At once she wished she had not spoken for her words galvanized Amandy to avid curiosity. She forgot her fruit. She sat down at the table across from Martha.

"In love? Rachel Bradshaw? Why, she ain't only twenty!" Amandy repeated it. Then she maintained a considerable silence, but Martha could see her thoughts were working busily, fairly shooting this way and that.

"I'll bet it's Jamie Allan," she said finally with conviction. And Martha breathed deeply in her relief. In letting Amandy think it was Jamie Allan, Rachel's secret correspondence with Con was safe. She looked at Amandy in amusement for Amandy was expanding so visibly in her scent of a romance.

"I might've guessed he want puttin' on a stiff collar and comin' round here to talk crops with Amariah," she said at last, nodding her head up and down. "I guess I'm growin' old not to have suspected what was in the air. Well, Rachel could go a sight further and not find anyone as good as Jamie Allan. He's always been a savin' boy. He was a savin' already when he come courtin' Joan and savin' more when he come courtin' Molly. He ought a have a lot set by, by this time. That'll please Amariah Bradshaw."

Amandy was talking to herself. But her words carried full meaning to Martha—more, even, they opened up to her all the beautiful possibilities, if only Rachel *were* in love with Jamie Allan instead of Con Smith, who hadn't "set" anything by as yet. Martha always had liked Jamie. When Roger and Dick were home Jamie had come and gone at Twin Farms like one of the family. After Joan's marriage he had stopped. He had gone west for one summer. And

when he came back Molly was in the first flush of her young womanhood, prettier even than Joan, with a witchery in her eyes and on her lips that must have won any young man at once. At least Amandy had said Jamie was "courtin'" Molly; no one ever knew that he actually had proposed to her. Amandy had calculated he was too shy. And now Rachel—Rachel was always kind to Jamie, talked to him when he came to the house, sometimes talked to him after meeting. It was not much to hang hopes on, but Martha at that moment would have hung her hopes on the feeblest peg. And Amandy had said it would please father.

Martha continued looking over the raspberries, now without complaint, for her mind was working busily on Jamie Allan and Rachel. She wished she knew more about being in love. Could a girl, like Rachel, fall out of love with one man, like Con, and in again with someone, well, like Jamie? Anyway, Rachel hadn't *said* she was in love with Conger Smith, she'd just *looked* it. And if Jamie came often—Martha wished she dared talk more to Amandy but she didn't. If she talked she might betray Rachel's confidences.

All that day Martha pondered her problem and all that evening. After supper Jamie came up to Twin Farms on horseback. He was bareheaded and booted and Martha thought him a gallant figure and enjoyed a vicarious thrill just looking at him riding up. She peeped slyly at Rachel to see if Rachel was thrilled. Rachel was sitting in the rocker on the kitchen porch but she did not move from her chair. "Hullo, Jamie,"

she called indifferently. "Father's over at Freeman Miles'." She did not ask Jamie to wait. Martha, sitting straight and rigid, was wishing *hard* Rachel would ask him to wait. And when Rachel did not she herself called out, in a funny, choky voice: "Won't you get off and wait for father?"

When Jamie smiled down at her Martha blushed. Jamie slowly dismounted and came and sat down next to her on the edge of the porch.

"Guess I will wait. It's nice and cool up here, isn't it? Heard from the boys lately?" And to Martha's joy his eyes directed the question to Rachel.

Rachel told of the letter that had come from Dick the day before. And as she told of it Jamie Allan sauntered over to where Rachel was sitting and pulled up a chair beside her. Martha slipped into the kitchen and stood there for a moment, listening. Then she tiptoed on into the sitting-room where she couldn't hear what they said, but could hear the murmur of their voices. If only they'd keep on talking everything would be well. And if only father wouldn't come back from Freeman Miles' for a long time. She took up a book and held it. She couldn't read the book for it was upside down, and anyway she had to listen for that murmur. What a nice big deep voice Jamie had! Not as nice as Mr. Demy's but nicer than Con Smith's.

Father did not come back for a long time and Rachel stayed with Jamie and talked. They laughed a great deal, too. When they laughed Martha smiled. Her body was stiff with its tenseness and the fingers

that held the book upside down ached with the rigidity of their hold, but she stuck to her post.

The next day at dinner Rachel asked her father if she could ride Bess that night. Bess had not had a saddle on her since the summer before so father hesitated. But Rachel declared she wasn't afraid. And Jamie Allan was coming over to ride with her. She wanted to begin riding again—it would be something to do.

In the end father consented. Martha wondered if it was because Rachel was going to ride with Jamie. Blair offered to take Bess out first and let her get used to the feel of the saddle. And father said he'd tell Jerry to use the other horses on the mowing machine so as to let Bess have a rest. Martha exulted—everything was working together for Rachel and Jamie!

Managing a love affair Martha found to be a responsibility that exacted her entire thought. She would not quite use her "power" on it, for she had put that promise in the box and must stand by it, but she let herself *almost* use it. She sat for long moments at a time thinking of Jamie and Rachel and "wishing" hard about it. And as the days went by she felt with satisfaction that Jamie was winning his way. Rachel went riding with him again. She went to the movies in Middletown with him. She sat on the porch and talked with him, laughed with him.

Whenever she could Martha talked of Jamie to Rachel. Didn't Rachel think, as he rode up on his horse, Jamie looked like the picture of Sir Galahad in

the school? Rachel had laughed uncontrollably at that.

"Why, Sir Galahad had hair, dear child. And Jamie Allan is losing his fast."

Martha winced at Rachel's laughter. But Amandy came to her rescue by informing them that Jamie had more hair than he used to have, for his sister had told 'Liza Tucker that Jamie was using a Magic Hair Restorer and that it was making his hair grow like grass. And Martha added stoutly to this: "Well, Jamie's nice whether he has a lot of hair or not. What he has is like copper when the sun shines on it."

"Copper! I'd call it plain red. Some day your imagination is going to get you into deep water, Mart." There was a little glint in Rachel's eye that Martha might have taken as a warning but she did not choose to do so—there was too much at stake. And anyway, Jamie's hair *did* shine like copper in the sunlight.

Martha had an able ally in Amandy. Jamie Allan was much in Amandy's mind, so she talked about him at every opportunity. At the table, one day, she talked about how much he had saved. She knew because 'Liza Tucker had told her and 'Liza and Jamie's married sister were as thick as sour cream. Jamie was planning to build on the west end of Burt Allan's farm and was going to raise small vegetables. With an automobile truck he could get them into Burlington to the early markets. Father agreed that a hustling young chap could make a lot of money with truck gardening. Amandy averred that Jamie wasn't Scotch for nothing—he'd make a penny speak

twice, anytime, she guessed. Blair broke in with: "If he's such a hustler why doesn't he go to the city and work?" Father frowned at that but did not answer. And Rachel had not seemed to be listening to any of it, but Martha made herself think that Rachel was only pretending her indifference.

Rachel's birthday, however, shattered Martha's growing hopes with one sudden blow. It was Rachel's twenty-first birthday but Rachel had declared she wasn't going to celebrate it. She told the family, out of father's hearing, that she wasn't particularly glad to be a year older and still stuck in Greenbury. Gifts had come from Molly and Joan, enclosed in pretty boxes and wrapped in tissue paper, a leather writing case from Joan, some silk undergarments from Molly. Martha gasped at the undergarments. They looked like pink whipped cream as Rachel dropped them in a soft little heap. Amandy fingered them scornfully. "Them things'll last about one washing." Roger and Dick had remembered Rachel with money. Martha herself had selected a handkerchief at the village store and Blair nonchalantly had tossed into Rachel's lap a book he had bought at Middletown. It was a book of verses and Martha, peeping into it, had recognized some that Mr. Demy had read to them. Martha thought Rachel was having a beautiful birthday, but Rachel did not enthuse particularly over the gifts—except the pink underwear.

Amandy had baked a birthday cake and it had the place of honor at the dinner table. Rachel was late

for dinner. She had walked to the village, Amandy said. And when she came in Martha's heart sank. For Rachel's face was aglow with that light she had surprised on it the day she had caught her reading the letter from Con.

Throughout the dinner Rachel was very gay. When her father told her he had bought a saddle horse from a stable in Middletown for her, she ran to him and kissed him. But Martha knew that her joy was for something beside the saddle horse; she was less interested in that than Blair, after the first announcement.

After dinner, after father and Blair had gone out to the fields and Amandy to the kitchen, Martha, at a sign from Rachel, followed her to her room. Rachel beckoned to her to come in and shut the door. "I'll show you something if you won't tell a soul." She took a small square box from her pocket, opened it and held it out to Martha's gaze. On the blue velvet of the box rested a chain bracelet of gold.

"Con sent it." Rachel's voice sang the words. She took the bracelet from the box and slipped it on her arm. "Isn't it precious? Isn't he a dear? And I had the nicest letter."

Martha felt all crumbly inside; something that had sustained her went suddenly flat. She saw the gleam of the jewelry through a blur.

In the Greenbury code of courting no girl accepted jewelry from a man unless she was engaged to him. Martha made herself frame the question.

"Are you engaged to Con, Rachel?" Her heart beat so fast she thought Rachel must hear it.

Rachel was fingering the bracelet, turning it around and around. Her face was suffused with a deep glow that lighted her eyes, softened her lips.

"O, Mart—well, I suppose there's an understanding." And more than that Rachel refused to say.

Martha escaped as quickly as she could. She could not bear Rachel's happiness that was for Con's gift; her thoughts were in a jumble. She did not know just how much an "understanding" meant. Miserable, she sought out Amandy.

Amandy was making cookies—little spice cookies with nuts and raisins in them. Some folks were sure to come up to Twin Farms in the evening even though Rachel hadn't invited them and she'd have the cookies ready and a big pitcher of lemonade. Amandy held birthdays at Twin Farms as banner days of the year. Year in and year out she had made birthday cakes and birthday cookies for the Bradshaw young ones. She had seen two candles grow to three and twenty-three, could remember whether Dick had had chocolate cake on his eighteenth birthday, or cocoanut, the time poor Roger was sick and couldn't eat so much as a crumb of the marshmallow cake she'd made from a recipe she'd borrowed from Jennie Howe after they'd had marshmallow cake at the Lodge.

"Amandy," Martha began. "Amandy, what is it when a girl and—and—a man—have—an—understanding?"

Amandy stopped midway of the wide room, a nutcracker uplifted in her hand. "An understandin'?" she demanded. "Well, it ain't much. And no one knows that more'n Amandy Meegs."

Martha sat down limply in a chair. "Why?" she persisted. She had to know all that Amandy could tell her. "Isn't it—as good as—being engaged?"

Amandy set the nutcracker down upon the table with unnecessary violence. "No, it ain't. It's a long ways from bein' as good as engaged. When a girl's engaged to a man she's as good as got him for better or worse. He can't get away. And folks knows they're engaged. It's folks knowing about it holds 'em like the words had been spoken over 'em."

"But couldn't a girl have an—understanding—first?" pleaded Martha. She was fighting for Rachel's happiness.

Amandy forgot her spice cakes. She leaned against the table and clung to it so tightly that her knuckles stood out like sun-bleached nubs of bones.

"Of course—if she wants to. But she's a fool. No right thinkin' man ties a girl with just an understandin'. If he does she'd better look out for him. He wants the knot loose so he can slip out of it if he changes his mind. Slip out—and leave her—hangin' on to a loose end." Amandy stopped abruptly and then she did something Martha never had seen her do. She wiped a tear from her cheek with the back of her hand, wiped it with a furtive, half-angry quickness.

"Why, Amandy," cried Martha. And all at once

Martha knew that Amandy was speaking from some deep well of feeling.

On the stove the kettle was singing softly; from the hayfields came the muted hum of the mowing machine; out in the hen yard the chickens were making little clucking brooding noises. There was such a happy quiet over everything that when Amandy spoke in a rasping voice it jarred strangely on it. And of a sudden Martha saw Amandy as someone different than the Amandy she had known all her fifteen years. She saw Amandy for what she was—a woman whose hair had grayed and whose back had bent under years of faithful work, a woman whose eyes had dimmed and whose face had wrinkled from exposure to sun and wind, whose lips were thin and pulled at the corners from saying tart things. This Amandy she suddenly saw startled her a little. Why, Amandy was old, like Aunt Judith—like the furniture and the elm trees around the house, she was brown and dry looking like the leaves that fell from the elm trees in the fall. This bent, brown-withered old Amandy was wiping a tear from her face as she talked of love!

"I know," Amandy went on, in the rasp that had jarred on the happy quiet. "Because *I* had an understandin' once—and I come to find myself hangin' on to the loose end—an old maid. No, it ain't much to hold to."

"O, Amandy, I'm sorry," said Martha softly, in a little rush of tenderness. Still she had an almost uncontrollable desire to laugh at the picture Amandy

had drawn. "Did you want awfully to get married?" she asked.

"Why wouldn't I? Don't you think any girl'd rather be doin' for her own than somebody else's young ones? Don't you s'pose I had feelin's like Rachel's?" A dull red mounted over Amandy's face, softening it. "I set a lot of store by the good-for-nothin's soft words. I was sewin' on things and puttin' 'em by and dreamin' over the stitches." She jerked herself a little. "Oh, well, I might a been worse off, I guess. I've took care of my own self and mebbe if he'd lived up to what he talked about I'd be takin' care of him, too, by this time. I've got a good home here and the Lodge'll bury me proper and I don't know as anyone can ask more'n that." And Amandy picked up the nutcracker and looked at it absorbedly.

Martha did not want to laugh now. She could not with poor Amandy looking like a withered leaf, all brown and wrinkled. She wanted to ask Amandy more about her "understanding" but something in Amandy's compressed lips told her that the story was closed. Martha knew that Amandy's memories hurt; she would not probe and hurt Amandy more. Amandy went back to her work with an added briskness, as though making birthday cookies was the most important thing in the world. And Martha sat at the table and watched her, trying vainly to visualize an Amandy, young, eager-eyed, sewing on "things," dreaming—with perhaps a glow in her face such as Con's gift had brought to Rachel's.

After a little Amandy shooed her out of the kitchen. "If you can't do anything but set, clear out," she commanded in the tone Martha knew so well. And Martha "cleared out." There was not time to go to Sunset Rest, and Nelly Howe was in Boston. She wandered aimlessly out to the orchard.

She sat down under an apple tree. Life was so strange—she could well sit quiet and alone and brood upon its strangeness, upon how it had treated Amandy. Not for everyone was it always a joyous passing of the seasons, as she had known it. It might not be always so for her. She shut her eyes in quick apprehension. What if something terrible came to her? What if something hurt father, or Rachel, or Blair, terribly, something even worse than father's hurt-anger? She could not bear to ponder such a possibility.

She gave herself over to pity for Rachel, poor Rachel who did not know what a fragile thing an understanding was. Rachel was dreaming now as Amandy had dreamed. And she couldn't warn her. And poor Rachel so dreaded being an old maid. Rachel'd never be satisfied with a good home and a Lodge to bury her as Amandy was. Martha shuddered at the thought of a Rachel years from now, withered like a November leaf, gray, bent, sharp-tongued. And Rachel, so pretty and alive now. Martha felt hopeless, helpless, very small and futile beside the strange thing that was Life, that maybe knew what was going to happen to everyone, years and years from now, and would let one—let Rachel—go on, hanging to a "loose end."

CHAPTER X

"THE CROWDING SPIRES"

JULY marched ahead. Long, hot, cloudless days followed, one upon another, windless days, days of fragrant, verdant growing. Days of toil for men and beasts, as they gathered the first fruits of the season.

Over Twin Farms, Work, like an indomitable god, held sway. It was the high moment of the year for his exactions. These humans of the soil served him from sun-up to dusk, an uncomplaining serving for the most part, a wordless serving for words took from that strength that must go to the god. Then during the long evenings, when a faint breeze lifted from the valley and the first stars hung like tiny sparks against the deepening night sky, Amariah Bradshaw and Jerry would sit, inert, at the barn door, measuring mentally what had been accomplished during the day, what must be done to-morrow, Blair most often would lie stretched on the ground, his hands clasped under his head, a figure aloof, unapproachable. Amandy, in her stocking feet, rocked ceaselessly on the corner of the porch that got the breeze. Rachel shut herself in her room, its windows wide to the night. Martha went to bed.

Meals were quickly despatched. If anyone talked it was Amariah or Jerry, and about the crops or whether there was any sign of rain. Blair ate ravenously, noisily, his brows perpetually drawn into a scowl.

Amandy calculated whether she had enough cans for all the cherries. Rachel and Martha kept on their big aprons, stained with fruit juice.

Under the abstraction and fatigue was a glow of accomplishment. Even Blair felt it. "I guess we'll finish the south field to-day, father." The muscles of his shoulders and arms were hard as rocks and he liked to run his hands over them. Amandy looked upon the rows of glass jars, all filled and labelled, with the exultation of a creator. Rachel and Martha had taken over the household tasks; when father took a second piece of Rachel's pie Rachel's face flushed with pleasure.

Summer was always like this at Twin Farms. This July was so like all the others she had known—except for Aunt Judith's continued absence—that Martha almost lost that panic she had felt in the orchard when it came to her that life might not always go on tranquilly for her and hers. Rachel was too busy to dream over her "understanding," at least Martha did not observe any protracted periods of dreaming. Blair had brought the saddle horse that had been father's gift from Middletown and Rachel or Blair rode him in the evening when they were not too tired. He was a pretty little animal. Rachel had named him Prince. One evening she rode with Jamie. When Blair rode him he usually took the wood road and Martha suspected that he went to Sunset Rest. But he did not tell her and there were no opportunities now for secret meetings between them in the barn.

For herself Martha had stolen only three afternoons with Willa but they had been so utterly delightful that she had been contented. It was more than ever like stepping into a story book, being one of its characters. To slip off her apron and run from the Twin Farms' kitchen, with its steaming jars and odorous kettles and sticky dishes and Amandy's flow of comment on the work she'd done and had still to do, to lie on the ground outside the little house on wheels, pretty chintz pillows heaped about her, and listen while Willa and Mr. Demy talked or Mr. Demy read to them was indeed as though some magic lifted her from one sphere into another. It was always cool on Sunset Rest. The woods shut them away from that world of growing crops and their garnering. Sometimes she and Willa wandered in the woods. Willa was always finding something interesting there. Through Willa, Martha was learning to find beauty where she had never found it before. Willa talked about the trees as though they were humans; she had named the big pines at the edge of the wood. She called the white birches "ladies." She had endowed alluring spots with whimsical mysteries that enthralled the matter-of-fact Martha. She had written a poem to the fringe of wild plum trees near the house on wheels and Martha thought it a very wonderful poem.

One afternoon Willa sat prim and straight in a little wicker chair placed in the shade and stitched on an embroidering frame, wove her needle in and out in an intricate pattern of bright colors. It was not like any

embroidery Martha knew. 'Lisa had taught her, Willa explained. She told Martha that the women of her country—the country that had been hers—were always proud of their skill with the needle. As she worked she told Martha folk stories of that country. 'Lisa had told them to her when she was very little. Poor 'Lisa had been very homesick when she first came to America with Willa and Mr. Demy. Martha thought the stories Willa told her very beautiful, especially as Willa told them in her low, singing voice.

"But you have wonderful stories, too. And you are making stories in your land that years and years from now children's nurses will tell them and they will think them beautiful. I'm glad I'm here where they are making the stories. Demy is glad, too. He says there is no land like this. Very soon we will both be citizens. 'Lisa will be sorry. Demy wanted her to be a citizen, too, but she would not consent."

When Willa was telling her this Martha mustered a great deal of courage and asked: "O, Willa, where is that country you came from? I won't tell anyone, honest. Not even Blair. Can't I guess? Won't you just shake your head if I'm wrong and not if I'm right? Is it France? Is it Spain? Is it—is it—Russia?"

Willa laughed. "I'd love to tell you, Martha. But Demy told me not to speak of it because—" She stopped and laughed again. "Well, I can't even tell that. It's silly to be so mysterious but Demy knows best. Anyway, I can tell you this. I've lived in so many places with Demy that all that which was home

once gets hazy and I can't tell what is real and what I am imagining. 'Lisa says it is a beautiful country with hills and deep rivers and soft skies. I'm sure, though, it is not any more beautiful than your hills, here."

Martha loved Willa more than ever for saying that, for thinking the valley here and the hills so beautiful. She felt a little rush of pride in her own especial corner of a world which Willa seemed to know so well. Willa had been everywhere and yet she loved the hills around Sunset Rest! Why, Willa had ridden over the desert in Algiers on a camel. With her father she had been fêted at the palace of an Arab chieftain. Martha and Blair liked that story best of all and made Mr. Demy repeat it over and over. Mr. Demy and Willa always laughed over it. The banquet hall had been so magnificent, and the etiquette of the feast so strange. They had been served a sheep, roasted whole. That had made Willa a little ill. Martha, herself, shuddered, just at the telling. The guests had had to tear the meat apart with their fingers for no one was offered knives or forks. Each guest ate with his fingers.

"I shall never forget Willa's eyes," Mr. Demy had told. "While I was exchanging the usual courtesies of conversation with our host—through an interpreter, of course—I, like the others, held a piece of the meat in my hand. But Willa only pretended to eat a little from what was offered to her by the Arab noble at her side. I am afraid she was very hungry when we went away. However, there was much to admire. We were served on silver and gold plates of great beauty. And I shall

never forget the splendor of the robes the guests wore. Barbaric but pleasing."

Willa had gone one summer to Iceland with Mr. Demy. Martha was not certain where Iceland was, she always had thought of it as very far away, like "Greenland's Icy Mountains," but Willa's having been there made it seem quite near. Willa and Mr. Demy had a way of making strange places and things not strange at all.

When the hay was all cut and stacked in great towers that shone like washed gold in the sunlight and Amandy's cherries and currants were done, Twin Farms took a breathing spell. Amariah Bradshaw went to Burlington for the day and took Rachel with him. Martha had wanted to go, too, but left at home, she consoled herself with the prospect of spending a long afternoon with Willa.

She was doing up Blair's room. "Mind you turn the mattresses to-day," Amandy had commanded her. As she obediently turned the narrow mattress of Blair's bed a book dropped from it to the floor. Martha knew all the books at Twin Farms. This was not one of them. It was bound in leather that bent a little in one's hands. It was a translation. "Translated from the German," it said on its title page. Martha did not think that the little library down in the village had any translations from the German. Its scant shelves held only dilapidated fiction of the last decade. This book felt like one of Mr. Demy's. She sat on the bare mattress and read a page here and there. There was a

boy Hans in the story. He was a shepherd boy. He left his hills for the big city. She read on and on. Amandy called to her but she did not answer. She skipped the longer paragraphs, turned the pages quickly. Now Hans was a soldier, fighting. She skipped that, a little chill cutting her heart. Hans was wounded. Oh, wouldn't he go back, now, to his hills? Amandy called again. She turned to the last chapter. No, Hans had not gone back.

She closed the book and sat with it in her hand. She saw Blair the Hans of the story, Blair, turning his eyes to the "crowding spires" that was the city as Roger and Dick had done. She did not want to see him like Hans or Roger or Dick. And why had he hidden the book?

She started at the sound of a step on the stairs. It was not Amandy's. Blair appeared in the door. She stood up quickly, the book in her hand.

"I found it. I was making your bed," she explained. Blair's angry eyes hurt her. "Is it—is it Mr. Demy's?"

"Yes. He's giving me another that I'm going to read when I finish this one." Blair's voice was defiant. "If I had more time I could read a lot of them. I wish I could. They're great. They show a fellow how big this world is—all you can do if you can get out into it." He scowled heavily. "If you aren't stuck in a place like Greenbury."

There flashed across Martha's mind a recollection of Roger and Dick using something like these same

words in that memorable meeting before their going. It frightened her. Blair's scowl frightened her. "Greenbury is lovely," she defended. "Mr. Demy and Willa both think so and they've been all over."

"But they're not staying here forever!" Blair retorted savagely. "And I'm not, either," he added.

"O, Blair," Martha cried and then stopped. This Blair who stood before her seemed suddenly older, taller, more a man, like Roger and Dick. And he was so handsome with his head thrown back and his eyes dark with the intensity of his feeling.

"Mr. Demy's the greatest scout who ever lived. And he's lived, I tell you. We're friends. A fellow can talk to him—he always knows what you're thinking and what you want to know—and he just feeds it to you. He's been to two colleges and he knows everything. There isn't anyone like him!"

Now Blair's glowing tribute found no echo in Martha's heart. She was held by a feeling of apartness from Blair. Mr. Demy had brought it about. He'd brought that shine in Blair's eyes the night of the entertainment at school, he brought this new tone into Blair's voice. Oh, she could almost wish she had never found Mr. Demy herself—even though that meant not finding Willa.

Blair took the book from her hands. He slipped it into his pocket. "I'm going to take it back this afternoon and get another. I want to talk to Mr. Demy about—" Blair stopped short on what he had been going to say. "Oh, something I want to do," was all he

proffered to poor Martha. He turned on his heel, went out and down the stairs.

Martha finished making the bed. She worked slowly. She did not want to go to Sunset Rest herself, now. If she went she knew she would be watching Blair and Mr. Demy. She didn't think Blair wanted her to go. He must have known she would want to go and he had not said anything about it.

After luncheon Blair rode away on Prince. Martha watched him disappear over the wood road. Then she went back into the house, heavy-hearted.

Amandy brought the mail up from the village. There were the usual circulars, an issue of a farm journal, and one fat letter. It was to Rachel and addressed in Conger Smith's exaggerated handwriting. Martha took it and carried it to Rachel's room. She scarcely glanced at it. Her heart was too full with Blair to have room even for Rachel's "understanding." Her thoughts were with Blair at Sunset Rest.

Father and Rachel could not return until late in the evening. Blair did not appear for supper. Jerry had taken the afternoon off, too. Martha and Amandy ate at the kitchen table. Amandy talked a great deal but Martha ate in silence. She was thinking of Hans in the story.

The next morning Jerry came into the house, greatly excited. The lock on the barn door had been broken. He held it in his hands. He showed Amariah Bradshaw how it had been cut by a heavy file.

A heavy anger suffused Amariah Bradshaw's face.

He hated evil-doers. He resented evil doing in his community.

"Anything missing?" he asked, tersely. "Seen anyone hanging 'round?"

Jerry said there was nothing missing in the barn as far as he'd noticed yet. And he hadn't seen anyone around. Blair said he had put Prince in his stall at nine o'clock and everything had been all right then. They all stood in a little circle and looked at the broken lock in Amariah Bradshaw's big hands. Except Martha—she looked at her father's face. She remembered the night that she had seen a shadow of a man disappear around the barn. Perhaps she ought to tell father she had seen it. But she did not want to.

"Let me catch anyone around here who doesn't tell his business and I'll have the law on him," Amariah Bradshaw said, grimly. "Blair, give Jerry a hand. I'm going down to the village."

CHAPTER XI

BLAIR DECIDES

"FATHER—"

Something forced in Blair's voice brought Amariah Bradshaw to a quick pause in the doorway. It was as though Blair had been calling to him for some time and only now had been able to give sound to his effort. The father went back to where Blair stood by the window.

"What is it, son?"

Blair did not turn from the window. His father saw the set of his face only in profile. Martha saw it, too, with a quickening of her heartbeat.

Outside it was raining. It had rained all day. The steady downpour had brought a cessation to the usual summer activities, a let up that had as queer an effect upon the household at Twin Farms as though a great clock suddenly had stopped its ticking.

Martha wondered if she ought to run out of the room. But Blair knew she was there. Rachel had been with them up to a moment ago and might come back in at any moment. Anyway, she had to know what Blair was going to say.

"What is it, son?" father asked again.

"I've decided to go to Harvard. I want to go there instead of the University of Vermont."

"*You've* decided," Father's deep voice rumbled over Blair's.

"Yes. Why shouldn't I be the one to decide? I'm the one who's going. I'm going to be a doctor." Now Blair swung around and faced the room. His head was up and his shoulders thrown back. "I'd like that. It's a man's job. It's fighting—fighting the most damnable foes that humans have, fighting them with what you've learned in your head. It's a decent kind of fighting."

"Hans was a doctor!" thought Martha and she wondered if she said it aloud. She hung on father's answer. Even though Blair's words turned her heart faint, *she* thought he was wonderful—he was not like Dick or Roger, who had just said they wanted to get out of the valley and go where a man could make some money. Blair wasn't thinking of the money. Oh, father must think Blair fine, too.

Father did not say what he was thinking. He stood there, a great figure that dwarfed the others, his head thrust forward, his eyes hard on Blair's face.

"I can get what I want in Harvard," Blair went on, speaking quickly now. "Dick says I can live cheaply with him. I've got a catalogue and I know what I've got to study to get in—how long it will take me."

"Wait a minute. Go back a bit," said father. "A doctor? What put that into your head? Well, we have to have them. But you called it a man's job—a fighting job. Am I less a man than Doc Merriweather?"

"Oh, *him!*" retorted Blair scornfully. "I don't mean to be a fussy old woman like Doc Merriweather! I'll bet he doesn't know what the violet ray is. I'm

going to be a surgeon. I'm going to live in some big city where you're right in the heart of what's doing. Why, there is something new discovered in science every day, they say. I don't suppose Doc Merriweather knows that. He'd rather putter around in his turnips than keep up with the times. He's all right for this kind of a place where folks are just born and die—but don't think *I* want to be that sort!"

Then Martha saw the hurt-anger come into father's face. Oh, why had Blair said that? All her pride in Blair's fine-sounding ambitions went into a quick pity for father.

"So you don't want to be that kind of a doctor! That kind of a man. What if everyone said that? What would we do here? You say we're born and we die here—you're right, of course. But Doc Merriweather was good enough to bring you children into the world and good enough to ease your mother's going." Father could not say any more; even what he had said had been difficult as Martha knew by the working of his face. After a long moment he added: "We'll have a meeting on this. Tell Rachel to be on hand after supper. And Amandy." And then he walked slowly out of the room.

Blair went out, too, without noticing Martha. She sat very still in her chair, shivering a little. The rain beat against the window.

Martha tried to forget father's hurt-anger and think only of what Blair had said. He had made it sound so wonderful. Fighting! That kind of fighting was bet-

ter than fighting in wars against other men. And Blair would make a wonderful fighter. She saw him a man, his strong shoulders straight, his head thrown back, his eyes alight with his vision. Her expectation was made up mostly of her tender pride in Blair. He must have talked it over with Mr. Demy. He had said nothing to her about wanting to be a doctor. She felt a little stab of jealousy. But as quickly she told herself that Blair was not likely to talk of such plans to a girl. Anyway, perhaps he had not known he wanted to be a doctor until Mr. Demy put the idea into his head. She started a little. That was what father had asked. "What put that into your head, Blair?" Ought father to know the truth?

Poor Martha. Once more she was torn by conflicting loyalties—loyalty to Blair, her pal as well as brother, loyalty to what she knew Mr. Demy to be, and most of all loyalty to her father. She had seen that look of suffering cross her father's face. Long ago she and Blair had sworn they would not let father be hurt-angry again. At least she had so sworn; she remembered that Blair had given only half-hearted acquiescence. Perhaps something in Blair had foreseen this moment. Why couldn't Blair have talked it all out with father right from the beginning, instead of with Mr. Demy? But you couldn't talk with father that way. And you could with Mr. Demy. Blair himself only a few days before had said that a fellow could talk with Mr. Demy—that he just fed you what you wanted to know.

She might go to Mr. Demy and tell him that Blair was hurting father, that father wanted him to stay at Twin Farms, that he was the last of the boys to stay, that if he went away there would be no one left with father. She might beg Mr. Demy to make Blair see that he should stay. She tried to think how she could say it and make Mr. Demy understand. But somehow that did not seem fair to Blair. And Blair was very much in earnest. She was sure of that. And if he stayed at Twin Farms all his life he might be very unhappy. He certainly did not go about his work on the farm with any fine light kindling his eyes. He always scowled. He'd said innumerable times that he hated it.

Perhaps she ought to tell father that it was her fault that Blair wanted to go—her fault way back at the beginning. She had found Mr. Demy. And she and Blair had not told anyone of their friendship with the stranger. She had claimed it as her right to choose her friends but now she knew she'd been afraid to tell. It was her fault further back even than that. She'd sent Aunt Judith away. If Aunt Judith had been home her absences from the house would have had to be explained. "Oh, dear!" sighed Martha, steeped in a flood of guilt. But if she told now about Mr. Demy it might thwart Blair's hopes utterly. Her thoughts travelled in a distressing circle and came back to where they had begun—that Blair's ambitions were wonderful!

Anyway, there would be a meeting to-night. It

would all be decided as every other thing at Twin Farms was decided.

When the family was gathered in the sitting-room father explained briefly that Blair wanted to go to Harvard instead of the University that was good enough for Roger and Dick. And then that Blair wanted to be a doctor. Rachel cried: "Oh, splendid, Blair. When did you decide all that?" and Martha knew at once how Rachel would vote. Amandy followed Rachel with a characteristic: "Humph! Doctorin's all right if you like keepin' your mind on which pills are which." Martha said nothing but prayed in her heart that to-night father would not ask for her vote first.

Unlike that other meeting when Roger and Dick had declared their desire to go away there was now no show of anger. Blair's chin was set stubbornly but he voiced no appeal or argument. Father looked what he was feeling, but he did not put it into words. He asked Rachel to vote what she thought about it.

"Of course he ought to go if he wants to go. I wish I were a man. I wouldn't be a doctor but I'd be something else!" Martha saw her eyes flash a look of sympathetic understanding to Blair and saw Blair smile in answer.

"Well, Amandy?" asked father as though Amandy's opinion did not count for much but that from custom he must ask it.

"Let him go, Amariah. It might be handy to have a doctor in the family, nice soundin', too. He can set

up his pills and things in Doc Merriweather's house for like as not Doc won't hang on much longer. They tell how when the Doolittle boy broke his arm he got absent-minded and tried to set his leg instead."

And again Rachel flashed a signal of understanding to Blair.

"What do you say, Martha?"

Martha choked. Father had to ask her again. She dragged her eyes to father's face. It looked old and his eyes were very tired. Now there was hurt in them but no anger.

"I—I vote—that Blair does—what you want him to do." And then Martha burst into tears.

No one said anything for a moment. Then father spoke slowly. "Blair, will you compromise? Will you wait a year before you make up your mind? If you feel the same about it at the end of the year—you may go. You're young enough to give that much time to such an important decision, aren't you?" His voice was almost pleading. He put his hand on Blair's shoulder.

"Can I be getting ready for the college entrance exams?" Blair asked. "I can do that at Middletown. They'll give me credit for it." Blair was honestly glad to appease his father. A year was nothing.

"I don't care what you study. I mean we won't talk about it for a year. Then if you want to go—"

"Well, I'll wait a year, father, but I tell you that when it's over you'll find I think the same way as I do now."

"We'll see," was all father said. He left the room abruptly.

Rachel immediately gave vent to her deep excitement. She was deriving a vicarious enjoyment from what she termed Blair's escape. Blair would get away from Greenbury just as the others had. Her eyes were very wistful. She asked a great many more questions than Blair could or would answer. Martha felt shut out. Blair and Rachel were meeting on a ground of understanding which had no room for her.

Blair got out the catalogue of Harvard University and he and Rachel puzzled over it. He'd begin studying right away. He was behind on his Latin and he needed more English. Anyone studying medicine could not be too well prepared, he said. He'd follow a pretty stiff reading course along with the other work at Middletown. And double up on his science, put in extra laboratory hours. Was this the same Blair who often had declared school a waste of time? While Martha marvelled, admired, she felt a rush of longing for the old careless happy-go-lucky Blair.

He and Rachel were so absorbed that they did not notice her. She walked out into the kitchen, and on out into the night. The rain had ceased and a new moon was peeping from behind a streak of cloud. A heavy fragrance was lifting from the wet ground. Martha walked on into the orchard. She wanted to get as far away as she could from those two who had not noticed her. She wanted to cry, too.

In the orchard the panic she had felt before came

back to her, that sense of futility against what life might bring. She thought of Hans, setting his face toward the city. They had all gone, Joan and Molly, Roger and Dick. Rachel wanted to go. And Blair, sometime. Oh, not Blair!

Down through the orchard she saw a solitary figure standing by the stone wall that divided Twin Farms from Freeman Miles' acres. She knew at once that it was father. He was standing very still. She ran quickly to him through the wet grass. He did not hear her coming, did not know she was there until she slipped her hand through his arm. Oh, it was so good just to cling to father's arm. She leaned close to him.

"Why, Marty, child, what is it?"

"O, father—I—I just wanted—to kiss you."

CHAPTER XII

"AND YOU SAY HE IS NOT A THIEF?"

AFTER the night of the meeting Blair sought out Rachel more often. Martha would hear them in low conversation. Some books came and Blair showed them at once to Rachel, but he did not offer to show them to her. She had to ask to see them. "Can I look at them, Blair?" "Sure thing," he had answered carelessly, but he had not been interested to know what she thought of them. Martha suspected Mr. Demy had suggested to Blair to send for them. To her they were the first steps in Blair's progress toward his goal—that goal that led him away from her and Twin Farms. She did not read their titles. She put them down quickly and would not look at them again.

Rachel was making underclothes. She let Martha see them. They were cut like the pink undergarment Molly had sent her. Martha thought it silly to sit indoors and sew when Rachel had enough, now. She told Rachel so. "Silly! These are for my hope chest." That stabbed at Martha. She remembered what Amandy had said. A hot color dyed her face. She ought to tell Rachel, maybe. It was sad, seeing Rachel stitching and dreaming over her stitching when she had only an "understanding" with Con. But she did not know how to tell Rachel and Rachel might be very angry with her, anyway.

One day Rachel did not sew and she was so plainly downhearted that Martha pressed for the reason.

"Oh, it's only that Con isn't coming home. I think he might have come. He's said right along he'd come home the last week in July. I've been counting on it. But he's going to drive over to Cape Cod. He's bought a car. It would have been such fun riding around in it."

"Not as much fun as riding on Prince," Martha offered in consolation.

"A lot you know about it!" However, that evening Rachel rode out with Jamie Allan.

Poor Martha found now that something had stolen over the joy of her hours with Willa. It was a vague something—she could not say herself what it was. She still loved Willa and admired Mr. Demy as much as ever, but she felt a constraint when she was with them. She did not go as often as she might. Willa reproached her for the infrequency of her visits.

"Blair comes almost every evening. I am jealous of him; he is taking Demy from me."

Jealous! How would Willa feel if she told her that Mr. Demy was taking Blair from her, too? And from father. But it would not be fair to say that for Mr. Demy wasn't to blame. He didn't know he was doing it. Probably if she told him he would feel very badly about it. And, anyway, probably someone else or something else would have made Blair want to be a doctor.

One evening Martha noticed a light shining through

the crack under Blair's door. He had gone to his room early under the plea of being "doggone tired." Reaping had begun. But Blair was reading in bed. She lay wide-awake on her own bed for a long time. Then she crept back into the hall to see if the crack of light had disappeared. It was still shining. After that Martha looked each night for the crack of light and each night she found it. It didn't seem fair to father, although father had not exacted that Blair shouldn't study all he wanted to, he'd only said no one must talk about "it."

Martha was the only one who read a new meaning into father's quiet. She caught his eyes resting often on Blair's unconscious head and interpreted the moment's sadness in them. When Blair was not there father always asked quickly: "Where's Blair?" as though he wanted him.

Time and again it came to Martha that she ought to tell father about Mr. Demy; such confession at least would ease her overburdened soul. And as often she told herself that she could not do it now. As Amandy liked to say, there was no use locking the barn door after the horse was stolen. Beyond feeding Blair's ambitions Mr. Demy was doing no one any harm. And Blair might never forgive her.

If Aunt Judith would come home all her worries might straighten out, somehow. Aunt Judith had a way of straightening things out; it was her forte. Blair would not go so often to Sunset Rest. Rachel could not hide her sewing, or her letters from Aunt Judith. Martha kept hoping that each day would bring word

that Aunt Judith was coming. When a letter came she waited eagerly for father to read it at dinner-time.

But Aunt Judith was not yet through "straightening out" the Charlie Pickerings. Charlie's wife was "expecting" and Aunt Judith was inclined to stay as long as she was needed, if things were going all right at Twin Farms and she guessed they were, from all accounts. Martha could not look for any help from Aunt Judith.

"Nelly Howe's come home from visitin'," Amandy, the purveyor of the village news, announced at supper and Martha went down at once to see her. In her eagerness she forgot the strained relations between them at the time of Nelly's going. Nelly received her with open arms. She had much to tell Martha of her visit and much to show her. Nelly was immensely superior but now Martha did not mind.

Nelly chattered until almost dark; Martha mostly listened. When Nelly brought her mind back from Miss Everett and her visit long enough to ask Martha: "Hasn't a thing happened here since I've been away?" Martha answered: "No. Not a thing." She did not want to tell Nelly about all that was happening at Twin Farms. She was surprised at her not wanting to. Always before Nelly had been the sympathetic recipient of any bit of news, no matter how personal. She suddenly thought how much easier it would be to tell Willa than Nelly. The fineness of Willa's understanding made Nelly's seem coarse.

"I'm going to be bored awfully here after having

such a marvellous time," Nelly declared as they parted. "You can't imagine until you go away how *stupid* this place is!" Nelly, too! But Martha promised to see a lot of Nelly.

She honestly tried to get back her old feeling for her school chum. But, walking slowly homeward, she compared Nelly again to Willa. She could not help it. The things Nelly had told her of her visit—Nelly had gone into Boston several times with Miss Everett, but she'd told Martha that Boston wasn't so much, except the things in the stores. These had been simply "marv." They had had shore picnics, too, but Nelly had spoken only briefly of these. Martha, listening, had hungered to hear of the sea and the rocks and Nelly had enthused about the food and about Miss Everett's "friend," Mr. Owen, who had driven them. Nelly had "listened in" to some of the telephone conversations between Miss Everett and Mr. Owen and one evening when Miss Everett had been entertaining Mr. Owen on the veranda of her home Nelly had posted herself deliberately near an open window of the unlighted living-room within hearing of their voices. Martha thought that horrid but she had not told Nelly so. She felt too desperate a need for Nelly's companionship to risk criticism now. But Willa would not have done that. Vaguely Martha wondered why all at once she found Nelly so different. Or was it she who had changed?

When she reached Twin Farms she found the house dark. But as she approached the kitchen door father

came from the kitchen. He came close to Martha and she saw his face. She stopped short, in fright. She had never seen father's face like that. The muscles of it were twitching, his eyes were slits of fire. And his hands were opening and shutting so convulsively that the muscles of his bare forearms swelled like great cords.

"Where's Blair?" he rumbled in a deep voice.

Martha did not answer. But father did not wait for her to answer. He strode past her to the barn, looked in at Prince's empty stall, came back. She sat down limply on the edge of the porch and watched him, watched his hands, opening and shutting. If those great hands took hold of anything now they would crush it. Martha trembled. What had happened? What had Blair done? Would father hurt him when he came? She had a wild desire to run out into the dark and find Blair, warn him. When father went again to the barn she covered her face with her hands to shut out that bulky figure that did not seem like father, at all.

Then Blair rode up from the lane on Prince and dismounted. He was bareheaded and looked very handsome and boyish as he stood for a moment patting Prince's velvety nose.

"Blair!" Martha cried, but her voice was so thin that it did not reach him.

Father came out of the barn. Martha shut her eyes. She did not know what might happen. She heard father say in that strange voice, heavy with anger:

"Put the horse up and come into the house. I've some things to say to you."

Father waited until Blair came out of the barn. Then he stalked toward the house, Blair following him. Martha shrank back into the shadow until they had passed her. Then she went into the kitchen, too. Whatever Blair had done—and he *couldn't* have done anything—she must be near him.

Father lighted a lamp. His big hands fumbled with the matches. He had to strike three before he could light the wick. Then he faced Blair.

"Where have you been?"

"Over at the Hermit's Cabin," answered Blair promptly, but Martha saw a pallor creep up under his tan. His eyes met his father's squarely though, and he threw his head back defiantly.

"How long has this thing been going on?"

"What thing? Do you mean my knowing Mr. Demy? Since he came—"

Then Martha ran between father and Blair. It was her fault.

"Father, I took Blair there. I found them—Mr. Demy and Willa just by accident one day when they first came and they showed me the little house on wheels and Blair wanted to see it and I took him. And they're awfully nice, honestly! They're not gypsies—or anything like that. And we didn't tell about it because—we didn't want the others, Nelly Howe and Ted and all the rest of them, going there, because Mr. Demy and Willa wanted to be left alone. And we didn't tell you

because—because—" she faltered a little. "Because we were afraid you wouldn't let us go."

Martha was not sure father had heard her. He did not notice her. He was looking beyond her to Blair.

"If you know this stranger—so well—perhaps you can tell why he stays here in hiding, who he is. Can you do that?"

"That's his business. I haven't tried to find out. And he hasn't told me. But he's all right. He's a gentleman."

"Gentleman!" Father sneered. He was gripping the edge of the table. "A nice sounding word. An easy word for you! A scoundrel in peacock trappings! Has it occurred to you that maybe your gentleman is the one who broke the lock on our barn door, who's doing some of the marauding around this neighborhood? Easy-speaking by day and a thief by night?"

"He's not a thief!" cried Blair, hotly, his eyes blazing.

"O, father, he isn't a thief! I wish you'd know him. I've wanted awfully to bring him and Willa here. He loves this valley."

"Be still!" Martha shrank back. Father had never spoken to her like that.

"Can you deny that it's this gentleman of yours who has put these notions of being a doctor in your head?" he demanded of Blair.

Blair did not shrink. "No, I won't deny it. He's helped me a lot. He makes a fellow feel as though he could do something."

"And you say he is not a thief!" groaned Amariah Bradshaw. Then he put his hand to his head and drew it across his brow. Suddenly the flame of his anger died.

"At least you didn't lie, son. You stood up to the truth. You might have lied. If you had I'd have had to thrash you! No Bradshaw lies." Father seemed to be talking to himself. His head hung between his great shoulders. "And you'll mind this. There'll be no going over to Hermit's Cabin any more. For you—or Marty, here. That's what I say and I'll be obeyed." He turned and went out into the night.

Across the little circle of light from the lamp Martha and Blair faced each other. There was no mutiny in that long look—no question of obedience, rather the anguish of real loss. And instinctively Martha knew that Blair's loss was the greater.

"How'd father know?" Blair asked in a barely controlled voice.

"Blair, we should have told him at the very first."

"Oh, well, he'd been as hard then and we wouldn't have had anything." Blair blinked furiously. Martha ran to him. She did not want to see Blair cry. Her alarm steadied him.

"Father'll have his way now but he won't always."

"O, Blair, what will Willa think if I never see her again? Can I write her a letter and tell her? I'll ask father if I may do that."

"What'll you tell her? Tell her father thinks Mr.

Demy a thief?" No, she couldn't do that. She couldn't explain it without hurting Willa.

"Or making them laugh at us—laugh at father," added Blair, bitterly.

But Martha must find a way. She couldn't lose Willa or let Blair lose Mr. Demy. They wouldn't stay at Sunset Rest more than the summer. She'd beg father to believe them, to see Mr. Demy himself and find out that he was wonderful.

"You'd better not say anything more about it just now," warned Blair. "Father wouldn't listen and he'd only be angrier."

Martha had wanted to run out and find father and put her plea at once but she conceded that Blair's advice was sound. Father wouldn't listen now. However, she knew that Blair wasn't going to give up easily the friendship that meant so much to him. She knew it by the look in his eyes. He'd obey father but he wouldn't give it up. And she wouldn't, either.

"What I'm going to do right now is find out who told him," Blair muttered.

That was not difficult. Amandy brought the news and told it to Rachel. Philemon Baggs had been spying around Sunset Rest. He had seen Blair riding there and had followed him and watched from the edge of the wood. "Likely goin's on," he called it, and he'd thought Amariah Bradshaw "ought a know that his boy was takin' up with the furriner. He'd seen Blair lyin' on the ground 'longside of the furriner and listenin' while the man read somethin' out of a book.

Yes, Amariah Bradshaw ought a know before it was too late." "Mebbe 'tis too late," Amandy whispered to Rachel, her lips in a tight line. "Mebbe Blair's learned somethin' off him already he shouldn't know." Rachel had been more amused than shocked and had hunted Blair out for an explanation. She was inclined to be irritated that Blair and Martha had kept her out of their secret.

Amariah Bradshaw said no more about it. And his sombre bearing forbade anyone else talking about it. Blair and Martha waited, miserably, for what might happen next.

CHAPTER XIII

THE ROBBERY

Two nights later Peter Myer's money was stolen from the post-office money drawer. He'd made out a money order just before the post-office closed and Burt Allan had put the money himself into the drawer. He'd held it in his hand a moment wondering if he ought to leave it in the drawer or take it home with him. He had left it. And the next morning he had found the drawer open and the money gone.

The news spread like a flame in the wind. Men left the fields to gather about the post-office and talk it over. Feeling ran high. There was considerable conjecturing; suspicion quickly turned toward the "furriner." He was the only stranger around Greenbury and folks didn't know anything about him. Philemon Baggs said to anyone handy to hearing that he reckoned the sheriff better have a word with that man up at the Hermit's Cabin. Others, at once, repeated the remark as their own.

Boys, hanging on the fringe of the little crowd, took up the cry. By noon the women in their kitchens were talking of the robbery and of the "furriner." While a group of more sober-minded men of the community were meeting to take up a subscription to cover Burt Allan's loss, the others in one breath were indicting, convicting and sentencing the stranger at Sunset Rest. "Hangin' wan't any too good for the critter."

Blair and Martha knew of the robbery early in the day; Emory Ross' son had come for father and had told them. But it was not until supper-time that they knew that suspicion had turned toward Mr. Demy. That came of course through Amandy, bitter-edged. Father was not there. He was still in the village. Martha, a little faint with fear, turned beseeching eyes to Blair.

"That's all a damned mean lie!" cried Blair, hotly.

For the moment Amandy was more concerned in Blair's term of speech than in his defending the "furriner." "It's a good thing for you, young man, that your pa or your Aunt Judith don't hear you breakin' the Commandments like that!" But Blair ignored her. He got up and bolted from the room, leaving his supper untouched.

"Like as not he got that kind o' talk from hangin' 'round that wicked den of thieves," Amandy averred, solemnly. "Goodness knows what he'll come to now." She rolled her eyes.

Rachel laughed and it relieved the tension for the moment. "It's just like this village to name the guilty man at once," she said in a superior manner. "If we lived in the South they'd have him lynched by this time."

Martha choked over a mouthful. Rachel's careless words deepened her alarm. Amandy had a ready retort. "Honest men do well to take matters in their hands more times than not. If I'm not mistaken the folks

here will do it, now. Emory Ross hasn't the spine of a worm. Wish your pa was Justice. He'd do for that black-hearted furriner. And he'd settle up a little score of his own or my name ain't Amandy Meegs!"

As soon as she could escape Martha hunted out Blair. She found him in Prince's stall. He had his face against the horse's neck. Martha suspected that he had gone into the barn intending to mount Prince and ride over to Sunset Rest. But he had not done it.

From the barn she and Blair saw father ride up with Emory Ross. He took him into the house and they heard him telling Amandy to give them some supper. Remembering what Amandy had said about wishing father were Justice, Martha became more alarmed. "Blair, Amandy said father would want to settle a—a score of his own."

"He wouldn't dare!" But Blair looked worried. "Father's fair, anyway. He was decent enough to give me credit for not trying to lie."

"But, Blair, would they lynch—" Martha could not say it. She trembled so violently that Blair threw his arm around her.

"They don't do that—to white men—not in this state," Blair whispered back but his lips were dry. Like Martha he wished he could hear what father and Emory Ross were saying.

"Mart. Go in the house. We've got to know what they're saying. They're not just—to condemn a fellow without giving him a chance." His eyes blazed

at the injustice. "Go in and listen. You can do it easier'n I can."

"Blair, I'm afraid."

"Mart, we're the only friends Mr. Demy's got in this valley! He's all right. I know it! He didn't steal that money. If you won't go in, I'll go, only father'll suspect what we're up to if he catches a glimpse of me."

Martha straightened. She did not like eavesdropping. But Mr. Demy might be in danger. Lynching! It was horrible. She stole out of the barn and toward the house.

Father and Emory Ross were sitting at the table in the kitchen. Amandy had spread out their supper for them but they were not eating it. Father had pushed his plate aside as though he could not eat. Martha said, "Good evening, Mr. Ross," in a faint voice and walked quickly on into the sitting-room. Emory Ross did not notice her nor did father. Father was thumping the table with a clenched fist.

"I tell you—if you've any notion of defending this community you've got to serve a subpœna on that fellow! Make him appear before you and then you can do your duty. You're the only one who can do it." Father was shouting the words at Emory Ross as though he had said them before.

Subpœna! Martha did not know what that was, but father made it sound very terrible. She looked about her, frantically. She must get to Blair, but she was afraid to walk through the kitchen again. She

turned to the window. Without an instant's hesitation she opened the screen and sprang through it. Then she ran to the barn, praying that father might not notice her.

She told Blair what she had heard. Blair knew that a subpœna meant a summons. Mr. Demy would have to appear before Emory Ross—that meant appearing before the whole village. And there was no telling what Emory Ross or the aroused citizens of Greenbury might do. Mr. Demy must be warned. He must not be put in danger. Of course he hadn't done this thing but he should not be humiliated by even a public accusation.

"One of us has got to go to him," Blair whispered through tight lips.

"O, Blair! Father said—"

"I know. It'll be disobeying father. But this is—it's war. All those men against Mr. Demy. And, Mart, it's so rotten mean to treat him like that! They don't even want to give him a chance. They're sore because he hasn't been friendly, blabbed around a lot about himself. Well, that's his business."

"Blair, maybe he'll tell Emory Ross all about himself."

Blair threw back his head. "He won't. Why should he? I wouldn't, myself, not to save my skin. Not now. I'd shut up tighter than a clam. Old Emory Ross and the whole crowd couldn't make me speak just to satisfy them—when I knew I hadn't done anything. And they won't make him. But—"

"Then if he doesn't tell them—maybe—they'll do —something."

"Well, he's got to be warned. He can't be caught off his guard."

"O, Blair!"

"Mart, I love Mr. Demy!" Blair's voice broke.

Martha could not answer at once. She loved him, too. The last time she had been at Sunset Rest he had called her Pansy-face, and she had liked it. It had had a caressing sound and caresses even in sound were few in the undemonstrative life at Twin Farms. He had caught her face between his hands and smiled into her eyes. "Do you know how much like a pansy you look, child? See, Willa." With his finger he had traced the line of her face from the widow's peak of black hair at her forehead to her pointed chin. "And I know our pansy has a heart o' gold." Martha had blushed furiously at it but she had liked it. Yes, she loved him, too, and she loved Willa.

"Mart. If—if father was in my place—or yours— I think he wouldn't wait a minute—to warn—"

That was a new angle from which to consider the problem. Martha tried desperately to picture father in Blair's place, or hers.

"Bradshaws are like that. They do what they think's their duty at—at any risk. Father thinks he's doing his duty, now. He's wrong, of course, only he doesn't know it. He'll find out sometime. Mart, we'd despise ourselves all our lives, if we were cowards."

"Blair, I'll go." Martha gasped as she said it.

Something inside of her said it. "I can go. I wouldn't be a bit afraid. And—and father won't miss me and he might look for you. Oh, please, Blair, let me go. I want to. And after we've warned Mr. Demy then we won't see him again, will we? Not until father says we may." Her eyes hung imploringly on Blair's face.

"Do you think I'm going to let a kid like you do a disagreeable job like that?" Blair retorted. Yet there had been something reasonable in Martha's argument. When Martha begged that he at least consent to draw lots, he yielded. After all, Mart was Mart, even though she was a "kid."

He selected two straws. "The long one will be the one to go." He fixed them under a board. Martha shut her eyes tight as he did so. "You draw," he said, tersely. Martha drew with a hand that trembled in spite of herself. She drew the long straw.

"Well, that's that. But I feel like a quitter," growled Blair.

It was not a pleasant business to arrange. Through the gloom of the barn Martha saw Blair's face set in grim lines. She had hard work herself to keep from crying. She had to think often of how a Bradshaw was never a coward. It was decided that she should wait until father had gone to bed, then steal out of the house and run as fast as ever she could to Sunset Rest. She was not likely to meet anyone on the wood road. Blair had suggested she might ride Prince but she had balked at that.

The moon was almost at full. The clear light gave Martha a little courage. She ran the first part of the

way. Running, she could not think. But when for breath she had to slacken her pace she wondered how she could tell Mr. Demy. She wished she'd asked Blair just what she should say.

The little house on Sunset Rest was in darkness as Martha emerged from the woods. But beyond it, in the shadow of the old cabin, she saw the figure of a man. It flashed over her distraught consciousness that it was the ghost of Abner Joslyn. She halted. A sickly terror held her. Her heart beat so hard that it hurt.

But the figure turned slowly and moved toward the little house on wheels. At the same time Martha's nostrils caught the fragrant smell of tobacco. Oh, it was Mr. Demy, of course—

"Mr. Demy!" she cried and she ran to him, ran with unsteady stumbling steps so that, as she reached him, she would have fallen if his arms had not caught and steadied her.

He said something quickly—and it was in the "furrin" tongue. And Martha clung to him, her face against his khaki shirt, great sobs shaking her slender body.

"My dear little girl, what has happened?" he asked then, asked again and again.

"They're after you—they're going to—" Oh, she was not beginning right.

"Who is after me?"

She pulled herself together with a great effort.

"They're going to send you something—I can't

think—of the—word, but it'll make you go down to Emory Ross and tell him—"

He drew Martha away from the little house. He sat down on the rocks and made her sit beside him. He took out a handkerchief and wiped the tears from her face, tenderly.

"Now let's begin at the beginning."

"It's that robbery, the money that was stolen from the post-office last night. They—they think—you—did it. Oh, *we* know you didn't. Blair and I know. But no one will listen to us. And—and—they—all the men around are angry. They're mad because you— They don't like strangers. And—and folks that don't talk English. They're *awfully* angry. Even—even father. They might—someone said—that if—if it wasn't here—in Greenbury—they might—lynch—you—" Her voice broke in a shudder.

Mr. Demy threw back his head and laughed. He couldn't stop. Martha caught his arm in her two hands.

"Oh, *don't* laugh!" she cried. "It's true. I heard father talking to Emory Ross. He's the—the Justice of the Peace, here. And Blair says if they serve that—that thing on you—"

"A subpœna, I think it is."

"Yes, yes, that's it. Blair says you'll have to go or go to jail. And if Emory Ross tells you to tell—Oh, it's horrid! I *hate* those mean men! I don't hate father because he thinks he's doing his duty and he doesn't know he's wrong."

"No, he doesn't know he's wrong. This world is full of mistaken prejudice. And these hills make men

strong in their convictions. But, child, you should not have come all this way in the night to tell me."

"One of us—either Blair or I *had* to," Martha explained simply. "We're your friends. Blair wanted to come, but we drew lots. I wasn't afraid. But, O, Mr. Demy, won't you—*won't* you—go away?"

"You want me to run away?" he demanded, laughing again.

"We—we don't want those men to have a chance."

"Child, you are over-excited about it. They cannot hurt me. After all, perhaps I have wronged the hospitality of your village by not telling it something of my reasons for staying here. I am afraid, if I told them now, they would not believe me—they would find them too trivial. And I rather think I will not tell them. They cannot make me. Go back and say to Blair that I am not at all alarmed. Tell him that I am looking forward to meeting your Justice of the Peace. It will be interesting—and very amusing. I shall have something to laugh over the rest of my life."

"O, Mr. Demy," implored Martha.

He stood up and lifted her to her feet. "Now I am going to take you home. You must get back to bed where you belong. But bless you, little girl, for your concern."

"Mr. Demy, Blair and I know that—that you're better than—any of them—except father."

He put his hand under her chin and smiled at her.

"How do you know that?"

"Why, we *know!*"

"Little Pansy-face, you *have* a heart of gold!"

CHAPTER XIV

JUSTICE?

JUSTICE, albeit mistaken, moved swiftly that summer week in Greenbury. The stranger at Jasper Towney's was duly summoned to appear before Emory Ross. The date and hour were set for Thursday.

Greenbury prepared to turn out for it with more zest than it had made ready for anything since the return of its two war heroes. Amandy baked on Wednesday to "get it off her mind." Philemon Baggs allowed his oats would have to wait a day, he "wan't goin' to miss the fireworks." 'Lisa Tucker didn't know how long the "doin's" might last so she made sandwiches and packed them in a box.

Emory Ross usually heard pleas and imposed penalties in his own front parlor, but Amariah Bradshaw had made him think this case too important for such informality so he had prepared to hold court in the room over the general store. The room was not very imposing; it had to serve for many purposes and no one in the village felt much responsibility in keeping it clean. Against its walls still hung some dingy trimming from the last lodge dance. Its bare windows were grimy with dust. Some rubbish, empty boxes, torn paper plates, wads of paper napkins, and odds and ends of bunting were heaped in a corner. But then Emory Ross, himself, was not an imposing figure.

Small in stature, his shoulders bent from hard work, his little eyes blinking nervously, an ooze of perspiration streaking the edge of his celluloid collar, he looked far removed from the instrument of justice he represented as he edged his way through the gathering crowd. Besides he was suffering from rose fever.

"It's going to be a hot day," he answered to the "Good mornin', Judge," that greeted him from right and left. His neighbors did not always call him "Judge," but on this occasion they honored him with unction. "Going to be a hot day," he said politely to Mrs. Pepperill, who had brought her two children and had come very early to get a good seat. Philemon Baggs was officiously arranging chairs.

"'Sthat suit, Judge?" he asked. "I set this one here for the prisoner." He chuckled as he said it.

Amandy had come early, too. She wore her best dress. She wished she had had time to trim her hat over but she consoled herself with the thought that she could take it off and hold it on her lap. She was alone. Rachel had refused scornfully to accompany her. "It's worse than the witchcraft days," Rachel had flung at her. Martha was with Blair somewhere. Amandy chose a seat where she could see everything. Acting on 'Liza Tucker's suggestion she carried a "snack" in her pocket. She intended to stay to the end. She had no doubt but that that end would reward her.

Men, women, children crowded into the room. "Goodness I didn't know there were so many folks in

this valley," Amandy confided to her neighbor. She was straining for a first glimpse of the "furriner." "He'll see that he's goin' to get his connuppance."

The room was stifling. Three of the four windows were nailed shut. The fourth let in only a stream of hot sunshine. Emory Ross' collar began to cut his neck and he put a somewhat soiled red handkerchief in to ease the irritation. Now his temples were oozing little beads of perspiration. He wasn't saying anything now to greetings; his eyes kept roving restlessly over the growing crowd. Finally they found what they sought. Amariah Bradshaw had come into the room. Emory Ross beckoned to him. Men made a way for the big figure. Amariah went forward and sat down next to the Judge. And Emory Ross drew a breath of relief. He had been wishing a little violently for his familiar armchair in his familiar parlor, but with Amariah Bradshaw within whispering reach, he felt more assured.

An added commotion at the door focussed everyone's attention upon it. Some stood up to see the better. The crowd fell back to admit the stranger, then closed quickly about him and moved with him until it appeared that they were pressing him forward.

"Good morning, Judge—I believe Ross is the name?"

Only a rasp of heavy breathing sounded in the packed room. Eyes were on the straight figure of the man at the bar of justice. He was bareheaded and

wore the scarlet kerchief about his throat, the moccasins on his feet. He was smiling.

"Cool, I'll say," someone suddenly said loudly.

Emory Ross bent forward. *He* was not cool. His little eyes were blinking faster than usual. He removed the handkerchief from his collar, then put it back. Frantically he strove for dignity, for the words made familiar by an age-old code. But just as he got them at his tongue's end he sneezed violently, fumbled in his pocket for the handkerchief that was serving duty in his collar.

"Please—allow me," and Mr. Demy extended a square of finest, whitest linen. Somebody laughed.

Emory Ross stiffened. No one could laugh at him twice! He tried again to make a beginning worthy of the moment. There was an angry muttering in the back of the room. Amariah Bradshaw was leaning toward him, fixing heavy stern eyes on him.

"You have been summoned here to explain to our satisfaction your presence in this village. Unless you can do that—" But the Judge had to sneeze again. This time he found his own handkerchief.

Mr. Demy held out a slip of paper.

"This is my receipt for the money I paid Mr. Towney for the rental of what I believe you call the Hermit's Cabin. I think that establishes my right to occupy my present residence until the lease expires, does it not? Will you not ask Mr. Towney to verify his signature?" The stranger spoke coolly, unhurriedly. He still smiled. He turned his head toward

the crowded room as though seeking Jasper Towney himself. Certainly there was no cringing in his attitude.

"What we want to know is your business there at Towney's," someone shouted from a corner. But Mr. Demy appeared not to have heard him.

"That is what we want to know," repeated the Judge, nettled now out of his nervousness. "What's your business here?"

"Here? You sent for me, I believe, somewhat imperatively—"

Amariah Bradshaw made a move as though to rise from his chair. Emory Ross' face turned a purplish color.

"I mean what's your business in this community?" he blustered.

"That, I believe, is entirely my own affair."

There was a quick movement in the back of the room. "Jail him!" Someone else took up the cry. "Jail him! The furriner." "Send him back where he come from." Amandy shifted to the edge of her chair. The smallest Pepperill child began to cry.

"Kee-chew!" A protracted sneeze broke the tenseness of the moment. Mr. Demy regarded the Judge with sympathy. He waited until the convulsion had passed and then he asked coolly: "Are you through with me now? May I bid you good-morning and depart?"

"*No!*" But it was Amariah Bradshaw who spoke in a thunderous command. He stood up, towered over

the Judge. "In the name of Vermont I demand justice. If you do not do your duty and order this fellow from our village we'll—" A great clapping drowned out the rest of his words. Those, thirsting like Amariah for justice, hurrahed. There was a great shuffling of feet. Near the door, Martha, white-faced, trembling, clung to Blair.

Emory Ross pulled himself forward. No one, not even Amariah, had to tell him what to do! He knew as well as anyone. "Order! Order!" he shouted. No one paid any attention to him but it made him feel better to shout it. He had a very unjudicial desire to slap the smile off the calm, dark-eyed face before him; he gripped the arms of his chair to keep from it.

"So long as you don't see fit to answer the court, I proclaim you a suspicious character and I give you twenty-four hours to quit this place!"

There was more clapping of hands and stamping of feet. More and louder hurrahing. There was grumbling as well—for some this was not enough. They wanted punishment for the man who'd robbed the post-office.

But Emory Ross knew he had gone as far as he could. He was a little frightened that he had gone as far as he had. He wished he'd read up the law on it. He dropped back in his chair and began fumbling again with his collar.

The stranger continued to smile. He bowed his head with a gracious little movement of assent. He did not speak until the room subsided into silence.

"I can only obey your command." Somehow he made it appear that he was doing the Judge a favor. "I am frank to say that I do so with regret. I have found your valley most beautiful and I have spent many happy restful days here. If there has been something a little lacking in the hospitality I have met, it may be my fault. Believe me, I am appreciative of this moment. Long after you have forgotten it I shall remember it—with delight."

"Well, I swan!" exclaimed Amandy sitting so bolt upright that her hat fell from her knees.

Mr. Demy had not waited for the Judge to answer. He turned and moved down the room. A burly figure stood in his way. "I beg your pardon, may I pass?" he asked, waiting. He looked perfectly calm, he was still smiling. Just so he often had walked through the village street. The man stood aside. In absolute silence Mr. Demy walked from the room.

At the door Blair caught his hand in both of his. Mr. Demy turned and looked down at the boy. Blair could not speak. His eyes were swimming with tears, his mouth was working painfully. Mr. Demy put his hand on his shoulder and gripped it hard.

"Face front—always, lad." And then he walked on out into the sunshine.

The crowd lingered in the stifling room. The men pressed about Emory Ross. Some of them thought he'd done his duty—others thought he had not gone as far as he should. Mrs. Pepperill opened her lunch box. She might as well eat there as anywhere. Amandy

was too indignant to eat. She had wanted to see the "critter at least run out on a rail."

Martha and Blair walked home in silence. Neither could talk, neither wanted to talk. Only upon reaching home did Martha manage to whisper: "O, Blair, do you think he'll ever come back?" And Blair answered angrily: "Of course not. Would you, if you were he?"

A little later Martha saw Blair gallop away on Prince. But he did not take the road toward Sunset Rest. He went in the opposite direction. She saw him slap the horse's flank, then lost sight of him in a cloud of dust.

She herself crept up to her room and shut the door. Alone, she threw herself on her bed and buried her face in the pillow. She could cry now—she let the tears come in a flood.

"Oh," she thought miserably, "if only father hadn't been there! If only he'd *known* he was wrong!"

CHAPTER XV

A WOMAN'S DUTY AND A GOVERNOR'S WIFE

MARTHA had told herself she would never, never be happy again. And yet she was. Not at once, of course, but little by little the hurt of Willa's going lost its pain. She found that the everyday things that had made her happy before continued to make her happy. And she had the added happiness of just thinking about Willa. No one, nothing could take that away from her. She thought of Willa when she was alone; what she and Willa might be doing or talking about if Willa were still at Sunset Rest. She did not grieve as she thought of it, rather she made it a pleasant pastime.

Their mutual loss had brought Blair back to her. Now Blair sought her out to talk to her about Mr. Demy and Willa. And sometimes he talked about what he was going to study with her as well as Rachel. One evening he asked her if he could read something aloud to her. "It's great," he declared, enthusiastically. He took the book and they went out under the trees in the yard. He read aloud and Martha thought at once that he read almost as well as Mr. Demy. She did not understand what he was reading but perhaps that was because she was thinking how nice it was to be there, listening, while Blair read, how nice it was that he *wanted* to read to her. She saw father stop and look at them as he came in from the barns. She waved her hand to him. It was nice thinking that father did not

mind Blair reading to her. It made her heart light just knowing that they were not doing something that father wouldn't like.

Nothing was said at Twin Farms about that momentous hour when the stranger had been summarily banished from the valley. Even Amandy, influenced by some intuition rare for her, kept her tongue. Amariah Bradshaw made no comment. If he had settled his own private score against the stranger he gave no sign of exultation. His was not that kind of a nature. Perhaps he believed, as Blair and Martha had said, that he only had done his duty. And to him to do his duty, whether in a big way or a small way, was all in a day's work. Done, it was behind him.

The village took the same attitude as Amariah Bradshaw. It believed it had acted for the public safety in getting rid of the "furriner." Satisfied on that point it gave no more thought to the culprit who had stolen Peter Myers' money. It turned its thoughts to harvesting, to the renovating of the schoolhouse, to the twins born to Jules and Hannah Mills.

Rachel did not divine all that the strangers at Sunset Rest had meant to Martha and Blair so she felt no call for sympathy. Too, she was disclaiming any interest in village affairs, holding herself above them. Except for the moment's scorn she had shown Amandy she had taken no notice of Mr. Demy's trial.

Martha had time now to contemplate Rachel's ways. Strange, indeed, they seemed to Martha. Rachel was spending hours over her pretty person. She washed

her hair twice a week in rain water and dried it in the sun. Martha caught her rinsing it with something out of a bottle. Later, secretly examining the label of the bottle, Martha learned that the lotion would add a lustre of gold to the hair. She did not notice that it did to Rachel's hair. She ventured to tell her so. And Rachel only laughed, which was strange, for Martha had expected a quick retort. Encouraged by Rachel's tolerance, Martha examined certain other bottles on Rachel's bureau. One promised to remove freckles. As Rachel had only one freckle to a hundred on her own face, Martha thought that a waste of money. In a box of powder which smelled of violets she was more interested. Its fragrance made her think of the soap Willa had used. She found a box of rouge, too. But it did not look as though Rachel had used any.

Now Rachel dressed for supper every evening, carefully, "from the skin out," putting on the dainty undergarments she had been making. She had made two new dresses, simple things, she called them, but Martha thought them very pretty. She thought Rachel looked like a rose in the pink one. She hoped Rachel might have it on sometime when Jamie Allan came up to the farm so that he would see how much she looked like a rose.

Amandy frowned upon Rachel's extravagance. "You'll wash out all those duds yourself," she had told Rachel. And Rachel did. She seemed to enjoy the process. And Martha enjoyed watching her. She liked to see the dainty garments hanging on the line. A

little shyly she asked Rachel to help her make some undergarments like them for herself. The soft fabric must feel much more delightful against one's skin than the stiff cotton things Aunt Judith made for her.

One day, as she sat on Rachel's bed and watched Rachel comb her hair, Rachel turned to her.

"You know, Mart, you're getting old enough to pay more attention to your appearance. You're letting your skin go terribly. You're just a mass of freckles. And your hair is never neat. I don't believe you think of combing it more than once a day. It's a woman's duty to look as well as she can. You should see the girls in Molly's crowd. That Sue Love told me she spends a whole morning at the beauty shop every week. And she looks it. You should see how nice her finger nails are. And Molly wouldn't think of sitting down to dinner in the things she's worn through the day, or without a bath. No matter how tired she is. She's very fastidious."

Involuntarily Martha's hand went up to her dishevelled shock of hair. A faint flush crept up under the mass of freckles. She pulled her lanky legs up under her skirt.

After Rachel's reproof she washed and combed her hair carefully each day before supper and spent a little time before her own mirror observing her "looks." She had not given much thought to them before. Of course nothing could change her nose, or the unruly way her hair grew from a little peak over her forehead. And no lotions ever would bring a glint

of gold to her hair. She decided her looks were hopeless but she could bathe oftener and keep her dresses fresh and clean. To Amandy's freely expressed disgust she, too, began dressing " from the skin out " each night, for supper.

" Don't know what things are comin' to. It's high time your Aunt Judith come back and took a hand with all this prinkin' goin' on."

" It's a woman's duty to look as well as she can," said Martha severely.

" 'Tis, is it? And how 'bout a woman's duty breakin' her back over a wash-tub washing all those fol-de-rols out? If I had my way you'd wear black and I'd sew you up in it! A woman's duty. Who's goin' to see what you have on? I hold such speakin' ain't moral and you ought a be ashamed, Mart Bradshaw. It's Rachel puttin' those idees in your head. She's in love, mebbe. She ain't fixin' up for her pa or Blair or you or me. She's preening her feathers like a peacock, thinkin' someone's goin' to see them, but it ain't any of her own folks."

Martha was indignant. She did not know Rachel's motives but she knew her own. She wanted to feel clean and nice for her own satisfaction. And if father and Blair thought she looked nice, her satisfaction would be that much greater. Amandy was silly.

" It isn't wrong to keep clean, or to try to look nice. We get careless here. And I'm not going to, anymore. And I'll wash out my own clothes the same as Rachel does," she answered, loftily.

Martha continued to bathe and change very frequently. She washed out her clothes herself. The cotton stuff felt very heavy in the suds and she got no thrill hanging it out on the line, but she stuck stubbornly to her reform. One evening, when she appeared in a fresh gingham, a blue ribbon tied around her black hair, she had her reward when Blair, looking at her, exclaimed: "Say, Mart, you look pretty." That proved that it was her duty to look as well as she could. She shot a triumphant look at Amandy.

She had other reward for her pains. She felt that she looked a little more like Willa. Perhaps Willa's hair was glossy from much brushing and her hands dainty from much washing and manicuring. Martha suffered a deep embarrassment thinking how untidy Willa often must have thought her. She wished Willa could see her now.

With the added task of taking care of her looks Martha found every moment of each day busy. Her own garden was yielding its produce. Martha saw it with something of a shock. Other seasons she had watched her seeding come to growth with delight, guarded it, helped it. This summer she scarcely had thought of it. She was moved now to apologize to the rows of carrots and beans and beets, to thank them for growing in spite of her neglect, like nice, filial children. She was proud of them, humble before the eternal wonder of their maturing.

Amandy had been talking again of Jamie Allan's plans to have a big garden and sell his stuff in the city.

Martha speculated on what a big garden, ten times bigger than her square of ground, would look like—long, long rows of ferny carrot tops, long rows of beans, the yellow pods shining bright in the bushy green—it would be beautiful. And there were all the other things one could raise. And it would be so thrilling, selling it all somewhere. Always before she had sold her produce to father, rather taken that as a matter of course; she wished now she might sell it to someone else. That would be more fun. She wished she could take her stuff to the city. It was silly to think about it, but she wished she could.

That evening father asked Blair if he would drive the team to Middletown the next day. He wanted phosphate. He was short a hand on the farm and he could spare Blair better than to be absent himself. Blair consented with alacrity and Martha promptly determined to go with him. She'd take her vegetables along and sell them. It would be necessary to tell Blair her plans but then she would do that anyway.

Blair said he was going to ask Ted Deming to go, but there'd be room for her, too, he guessed. He did not think much of her idea of selling her stuff, but she could make a try at it. He went off to the village to find Ted and Martha went out to her garden.

Except to comment briefly on her industry, Amandy paid no attention to what Martha was doing and Martha worked furiously until dark. By that time she had gathered in her small crop, carrots, beets, chard, onions, beans. They made a fine display as she

arranged them in the barn. She'd get up early in the morning to pack them in the wagon.

Blair found her the next morning out at the pump scrubbing her carrots. She was doing the task painstakingly, as though she liked it. Blair laughed at her, but she only tossed her head and dared him to say he ever had seen carrots that looked more beautiful! He suggested that she tie the bunches with hair ribbons and she promptly retorted that she would if she had the ribbons. However, he helped her stow the crates and baskets in the wagon.

Amandy had not called them to breakfast so Martha decided to pick some flowers. They looked so lovely in the early morning sunshine, their faces still sparkling with dew. She gathered marigolds and sweet peas, larkspur, some early zinnias, a great bunch of nasturtiums. The nasturtiums were hers, but the sweet peas were Aunt Judith's, and the other flowers of Amandy's tending, but Martha told herself that, if she sold them, she'd divide the money, or perhaps drop it into the collection at church on Sunday.

She felt very proud as she rode away with Blair. She had dressed with care and thought she looked nice. She wondered if Blair or Ted noticed how nice she looked and if perhaps they did not perceive that she was a little grownupish. To ride to town to sell one's vegetables was a grownup job.

Blair and Ted did most of the talking. She listened in contentment. Occasionally she glanced back over

her shoulder to see how her treasure rode. She wished they'd reach town before the sun got too hot.

Blair and Ted had some errands of their own. They wanted to hunt up some " fellows " about a base-ball game. And Blair wanted to stop and see Mr. Thomas who taught science in the Middletown High. The phosphate loaded, Blair suggested leaving Martha, with the team, to her own devices. The two gray mares were perfectly safe. And Martha could sell her vegetables. Blair winked at Ted as he added this.

This was quite to Martha's liking—except Blair's wink. She flushed at that. But she held her head higher and her chin out. She'd show Blair that she wasn't afraid to try. The boys went away after arranging a place of meeting.

Martha did not know just where to go first. So she decided to stay where she was and eat her share of the sandwiches Amandy had fixed for them. The horses were standing under a great maple tree whose shade was inviting after the long dusty ride. She climbed down from the high seat and settled comfortably on the ground and began munching on a sandwich.

Two men came out from the feed store. They lounged in the shade of the maple, too. The big trunk of the tree shut them from Martha's view, but she recognized one of the voices as belonging to the man who had sold them the phosphate. Suddenly the other voice asked: " Ain't that the team from Twin Farms—over Greenbury way? "

"Yep. That's a fine pair. Amariah Bradshaw takes good care of his stock."

"Queer duck, ain't he? He's still usin' oxen on his hill meadows, they say. Don't s'pose mebbe he's heard tell of a tractor yet!"

"Yep. He's queer as all get-up. Like a rock when it comes to notions. Talkin' cattle all the time but when young Simpson stopped 'round there to interest him in putting in an electric milking machine he wouldn't listen to a word. Said the old way of milkin' had been good enough for him for a long time."

"His sort hate any newfangled idees, don't they? That's why these old farms peter out. Well, 'slong, Jim. See you soon."

Martha had put her sandwich back in the box. She was too angry to eat. "That sort!" Father. A lot that horrid creature knew of father! If father thought the old ways best then they *were*. And there was no farm anywhere like Twin Farms! Peter out—

She climbed back onto the wagon, gathered up the reins, and drove slowly down the street. The buildings on either side of it were as familiar to her as those of her own village. Occasionally she recognized some face among the passersby and nodded importantly. There was considerable traffic and she guided her team in and out of it skilfully, enjoying the experience. But it was not selling her vegetables.

Middletown had a "new" part. In later years the town had become something of a summer colony. At its edge lay a little lake, around which pretty homes had

been built, and spring always brought an influx of people from the cities. Now there were new stores that bore the stamp of modern business methods in their flaring signs, bright awnings, in their orderly bustle. Next to a candy kitchen, alluring with its white enamel and gleaming nickel and counters of tempting sweets, was a fruit and vegetable store. It was more like a stall at a fair. Martha never had noticed it before. Her eyes were held on it by the riot of color it presented. They were held, too, by a slender, graceful woman who was examining the fruit and vegetables on the stand. Something about the woman made her think of Willa, the light set of her head, the way she moved her hands among the vegetables. And she wore such a pretty dress! Martha wished Rachel might see the dress. She was probably one of the summer people. Martha drew up her team at the curb.

"Mr. Martin, these vegetables are not as fresh as I'd like—" the pretty lady was saying in a decided tone.

Mr. Martin hastened to assure his customer that his vegetables *were* fresh. And Martha recognized the voice at once. It was the man who had called her father "that sort." She sat very straight on her high seat.

But the pretty lady declined to believe that the vegetables were to her liking. "Wrap up the oranges, please. That will be all to-day." She spoke firmly, turned from the insistent Mr. Martin and faced Martha.

"Excuse me, but wouldn't you like to look at my

vegetables?" Martha said. Then she was frightened at her daring. She colored furiously. But the pretty lady stepped at once to the side of the wagon. And Martha climbed down and uncovered her wares.

"Why, these look lovely!" Oh, she was *so* much like Willa—like Willa would be some day. It was like Willa, now, to call the vegetables "lovely." Martha could not speak for watching the slender hands lifting out a bunch of carrots. "What have you?" the low voice was asking in a most business-like way.

"O-onions and—and—beans—and—"

"Oh, what beautiful flowers! Did you raise it all, child?"

"Yes. Or—some are mine—and some are Aunt Judith's—"

"How much are they? I'd like all the flowers. And three quarts of beans, I think. And four bunches of carrots. And some chard—a peck. Dear me, I'd like to take the lot, it all looks so appetizing. Mr. Martin, come and look at these vegetables. *This* is the kind I like to buy."

Martha could be forgiven a wicked little thrill of triumph. Mr. Martin came at once and looked over the lady's shoulder. He made no comment but he, too, could be forgiven that.

Martha was putting the vegetables into a basket. The lady was gathering up the flowers. She laid her cheek against them as though she could not get close enough to their brightness. Over them she regarded Martha, smiling.

"I think you must be a very happy girl, my dear, to live close to such things as these." And she sighed, ever so faintly.

"How much do I owe you?" she asked Martha when the basket was full. And Martha blushed a deeper red.

"Why—why, I—don't know. I—I wish you'd—just *take* them."

"Oh, I couldn't do that! I couldn't *think* of it." But the lady's smile was very friendly. "Let me see, you were asking forty cents a peck for your chard, weren't you, Mr. Martin? Five cents a bunch for onions—" Rapidly the pretty lady calculated. She took out of her bag some crisp bills that crackled under her slender fingers. She counted out three of them. "That will pay for everything, the flowers and all."

"Oh, it's too much," gasped Martha.

"Not at all. These flowers are worth more than that to me. They make me think of the old-time gardens I love and that I can't get any gardener to make." She put the money into Martha's hand.

"I—I wish you'd come and see Twin Farms—if you like old places." The words tumbled out of Martha's lips before she could check them.

"I should love to. And to see you, too. And I hope Mr. Martin will have vegetables like yours hereafter. See, Mr. Martin, did you ever see carrots like these?" She said good-by to Martha as though they were old friends and walked away to a waiting automobile. Martha did not move until the small gray car

disappeared down the street. Then she grew aware that Mr. Martin was examining the contents of her wagon.

"Pretty nice stuff, young lady." His tone was business-like. "Will you sell me what you've left? Any more like it to home? My customers like their vegetables dressed up sort o' pretty. And if you can fetch 'em to me I'll give you a better price 'n you can get anywhere else 'round here."

Martha stiffened. If she never sold anything *any*-where she didn't want to sell it to this man!

"My father *isn't* a queer duck. I heard you tell the other man that he was. But he isn't."

The man threw back his head with a loud laugh. "Well, will you hear the spunk of her?" he cried. "But that's the sort o' spunk I like! So you're Amariah Bradshaw's daughter, are you? Bless me, what started you comin' peddlin' your own stuff? That's up and doin' for you, I'll say. Nerve. Nothin' old-fashioned about *you*. Now, Miss, I didn't mean any offence when I spoke of your pa like that. His ways are all right. Everybody 'round here knows what him and Twin Farms's like. And he's got you to put pep into things. Say, are you that seventh child of his I've heard tell about?"

Martha admitted she was. Mr. Martin was deeply interested. "If I don't miss my guess your folks can expect anything from you!" That was what Freeman Miles had said a long time ago. Martha quickly changed the subject back to the vegetables.

"What'll you pay me for what I have there?" she demanded. She had no thought of giving her stuff to Mr. Martin!

"*Now* we're talking business." He looked into the wagon again, fingered the bunches of carrots and onions, counted the quarts of beans, mentally weighed the chard. He offered her three dollars for the lot. Martha thought that quite enough. She was partially mollified, now. She felt very important as she stood by while Mr. Martin unloaded the crates. He carried them in, and came back with the money and an orange. "Here, Miss, take that. Just to show we're friends. And can you bring me another load? Any fruit up on your place?"

"Yes, some plums. They're on my own tree. And I can pick some blackberries. Would you buy those?"

"Sure thing." Mr. Martin was glowing over the deal. "These city folks that come up here spend a lot on their stomachs. Say," he lowered his voice and chuckled a little. "Do you know who that was you were invitin' to come up to Twin Farms to see you? That was Mrs. Phillips, the wife of the Governor of Maryland! That's who 'twas. She's taken the Palmer house on the lake for the summer."

He expected Martha to be abashed but she was not. She was excited, however. "She loved my flowers," she answered. "And maybe she'll come to Twin Farms!"

She shook hands with Mr. Martin at parting and promised to bring more vegetables and some fruit very

soon. She had a little time before meeting Blair so she watered the horses at the trough near the square of park, then ate her orange and reflected pleasantly on her experiences.

She'd ask father for a bigger garden next year. It would be work but it was worth it. She felt again of the money in her pocket. What would she do with her wealth? Put part of it in the bank, that was an unwritten law of all earnings in the household, but she might spend just a little. She'd ask Rachel to send to Molly for some fine white material to make undergarments, and some sweet-smelling soap, and some powder. And some new ribbons for hair-bands—

She met Blair's astonishment at her success with assumed nonchalance. But she let him count her money and at his insistence told him every word of her deal. She told in detail about the wife of the Governor of Maryland. He and Ted roared with laughter when she said she had invited the Governor's wife to Twin Farms. "I don't see anything funny about that," she retorted. "She said she'd like to come. She loves old places and old-fashioned gardens."

On the homeward drive she was very quiet. Ted and Blair talked about a baseball game they had arranged with a team in Middletown. And Blair talked of Mr. Thomas. He'd been great. He was going to help Blair with his chemistry. Wrapped in her own thoughts Martha felt a detachment from these things that interested the boys. *She* was a wage-earner, with a wage-earner's responsibilities.

CHAPTER XVI

IN THE GARDEN

MARTHA'S adventure created a considerable stir at Twin Farms. Everyone in the household had to see her money. Everyone looked at it as though it were some strange currency. And everyone had to hear all the details of her experience. She did not mind when Rachel laughed at the part about the Governor's wife. She did not mind when Blair called her "Miss Bradshaw, huckster."

Though father did not say much Martha knew he was pleased. He walked with her around her bit of ground and helped her calculate how many more loads she might expect to take to town. He told her she could drive in herself with the light wagon. And he told her she could have a bigger garden next summer.

"Though don't forget, Mart, that it'll take more seeds. And that maybe you'll have to hire help to take care of it."

Martha had not thought of that. Now she considered the added expense, gravely. Perhaps she'd better not ask Rachel to buy those things for her; she might need the money.

She overheard father telling Freeman Miles what she had done. There was a proud ring in father's voice that made her feel warm all over. Now if Freeman Miles had answered that "you might expect

anything from that seventh child of yours, Amariah," she would not have cared.

Amandy took Martha's invitation to the Governor's wife very seriously. "Goodness, I hope she don't take it into her head to come on wash day or bakin' day. If she'd let folks know when she was a-comin' I could get up as tasty a meal as she ever had, governor or no governor." Plainly Amandy was setting store on her coming. Too much, for Martha's liking. She felt misgivings. If Mrs. Phillips came Amandy might make everything seem ridiculous.

Amandy was much impressed by the fact of a governor's wife selecting her own "victuals." "Always thought those southern folks never lifted a finger. Don't they have niggers to do for them? Mebbe she was a poor girl 'fore she was a governor's wife. If she comes I'm going to find out."

"O, *Amandy,*" cried Martha. Then she said: "I don't believe she'll come at all." Poor Martha almost could hope that she would not.

But she did. Two days later the little gray car turned up the drive at Twin Farms and stopped at the kitchen door. And the Governor's wife leaned out from it.

"Is this Twin Farms?" she asked of Amandy who had come to the door.

Amandy blinked. She may have looked for the Governor's wife to arrive in a golden chariot but this gracious, pretty lady bending from the trim gray car was radiant enough to move her. She whisked off her

apron and came forward to do the honors for Twin Farms.

"Get out and come right in. The folks ain't home —except Mart and she's out weedin' her garden. That's about all she thinks of these days. It won't take me a minit to call her."

"O, let me find her, please. She's the young girl to whom I talked, isn't she? Just tell me the way."

Amandy hesitated. "It's back of the house. But doesn't seem fittin' you take those shoes into the dirt."

The Governor's wife laughed. "They're my golf shoes and they are used to everything. I'd like to find her in her garden." And she walked away in the direction Amandy had indicated, leaving that well-intentioned soul a little disturbed as to the rightness of things in general and the unconventionality of governors' wives in particular.

Martha had finished the rows of beans and was beginning the carrots. She wore a pair of Blair's khaki knickers and a middy blouse. Her face was flushed from the hot sun and streaked with dirt. She hated weeding. She leaned for a moment upon her hoe and regarded the obnoxious weeds resentfully. Then she looked up and saw the visitor.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Oh!"

The Governor's wife—prettier even than Martha remembered her—came straight across the rows of beets and beans with an outstretched hand. "You see I came. And I am so glad to find you here. You belong here. A high priestess of your garden."

Martha gasped again. Awkwardly she put her earth-stained fingers in the cool white hand extended to her. Her face took on a deeper flush. She felt all legs and arms. But her visitor was looking at the garden patch and not at her. "So this is where those delicious things grew! My dear, if you have another hoe—I'd love to—just dig into the ground!" She said it with the eager coaxing of a child.

"I—I can get one," stammered Martha. She ran to the tool shed and returned with a hoe. Like Amandy she was disturbed; something seemed wrong somewhere, but she felt helpless. If a governor's wife *wanted* to hoe—

Mrs. Phillips removed her hat. Her smooth hair made Martha conscious of her own neglected locks. Mrs. Phillips rolled up her sleeves, revealing slender arms of a whiteness like Willa's arms. She seized the hoe Martha had brought and began vigorously digging in the ground while Martha stood and stared.

"There!" Mrs. Phillips lifted a flushed, happy face. "How's that?"

Martha laughed in spite of her heavy embarrassment. "That's all right—except that those are perfectly good carrots you're digging up."

"Oh, how dreadful! I confess I don't know a thing about a garden—this kind of a garden. For all I know the good things I eat might have grown right in a store. I've never lived in anything but a city." Her tone made that seem like a sad lot. "And something inside of me always has simply starved—for just this." And

she waved her hand with a gesture that took in garden, fields, house and all.

Martha felt the little rush of pride in Twin Farms that Willa had roused in her. That put her at ease with her guest. She showed her how to manipulate the hoe. They laughed gayly together over her awkwardness.

"Just wait, I'll get it! Do let me practise on this row and then I'll race you."

When Amandy, disturbed by the distinguished lady's not returning to the house, came around the corner of the wood-shed she stopped short at the sight she beheld. Martha and her visitor were "racing" down two rows. They were furiously swinging their hoes, turning up little clouds of the soft earth. They were laughing very gayly over their contest.

"Well, I swan," commented Amandy, and she turned and went into the house, more puzzled than ever.

"You won!" offered Martha, gallantly.

Mrs. Phillips leaned on her hoe. "I'm winded. That would be better than golf or dieting to keep down my weight. I should have a cabbage for a prize but instead I'll ask you to show me your flowers. And the barns. And haven't you pigs and calves? I'd love to pet a baby calf. O, my dear, I'm having such a wonderful time."

"I'll show you Lassie. She's my cow's calf," Martha said proudly. She explained then how each of the younger Bradshaws had some livestock. Lassie's mother was "registered." Mrs. Phillips was tremendously interested.

She wanted to go to the barns first and then to the flower garden. She asked a great many questions. She laughed over her ignorance and invited Martha's laughter. She took Lassie's black and white face between her hands and kissed it. "The pretty baby!"

But she liked the flowers best of all. She stood in the very heart of the bloom, her hands clasped together. "They grow as though they loved it," she said softly. "And why wouldn't they grow? Under such a sky, such sweet winds." She sighed a little as she had that day at the vegetable stall when she held her face against Martha's flowers. "You don't know, child, that feeling of being fitted into one kind of a living and wanting, in your heart, another."

Martha did not understand. "Aren't you—aren't you—a—Governor's wife?"

Mrs. Phillips laughed. "Why, yes, I am. Who told you? O, I suppose that talkative Mr. Martin. I honestly have tried to forget it, up here. Here, where life's so beautifully simple, so all your own to do with it what you will, it didn't seem to count for much, being a Governor's wife. Not nearly as much as being a girl at Twin Farms. Child, you can't know how one is driven in a city, how fast life goes by! It's like the fields and hills and cities rushing past your train window so fast that you haven't time to look at anything before it's gone. It's just like that. You haven't time to pick out the things you love to do and do them to your heart's content. You haven't time for *anything!*"

Still Martha did not understand. Her only experi-

ence with a train was the Burlington local and the fields and hills and towns didn't fly by that so fast.

Mrs. Phillips laughed at her puzzled face. "Don't mind my philosophizing, child. I'm just a misfit and there are too many in this world for me to whine about it. You see circumstances made me—well, a Governor's wife, as you put it, and I am certain Destiny intended me for a quiet little cottage somewhere in the open, only somehow or other it overlooked me. Destiny must get befuddled sometimes, managing so many stupid humans. There, you're more bewildered than ever. Perhaps, some day, you'll understand what I mean. But I hope you never will."

She bent to the flowers again, fingered the blossoms nearest her with a caressing touch. Martha loved the old garden and to have Mrs. Phillips love it, too, gave her a sense of kinship with this Governor's wife that was pleasing, a greater pride in the flowers. "Hollyhocks, marigolds, zinnias—" Mrs. Phillips was naming them as though greeting friends. She waved her hand gayly to the wall of hollyhocks. "Country maidens in gingham frocks," she quoted.

"Cherry an' amber, an' pinks without name,
Yaller an' scarlet an' crimson a-flame,
Ruffled an' scalloped an' smilin' the same
On folks from country or city," she finished.

"A poet wrote that who is blind and yet she knows the beauty of flowers. She must see them with her soul. Sometimes I think most of us are more blind

than she. Child, what gloriful nasturtiums! What a symphony of color they make. 'Like fires from out an opal of iris tones—' My same poet said that, too. May I pick some?" She gathered a few of the blossoms and thrust them into her white blouse. "There! Aren't they lovelier than any jewels?" she asked laughingly.

Martha could not answer for the joy and wonder that confounded her. After a little they walked to the house. She wanted Mrs. Phillips to like the old house, too. She told her of that first Noah Bradshaw who had built a log cabin just here on the hillside.

"I *knew* it was a kingdom," said Mrs. Phillips.

But Martha's elation vanished when she viewed what Amandy had been doing. When Martha had thought of the Governor's wife possibly coming, she had planned that she would offer "tea" after the fashion that Willa had served it. At Twin Farms there were no dainty tea cloths or napkins, such as Willa had, but she would take it out under the trees, perhaps iced, with thin slices of lemon and little cakes to eat with it. Amandy had no such ideas. She wouldn't insult any visitor with as "skimpy" a repast as that—especially a Governor's wife. So while Martha and Mrs. Phillips were roaming around the place, Amandy had been very busy. Their distinguished guest would see that no one went away from Twin Farms hungry!

Amandy had spread a white cloth over the red-and-white checked one used every day and had taken the

time to don her own "meeting" dress. Martha was glad of *that*. But it was supper—not tea! The table groaned with its load; sliced cold meat, potato salad, cake in huge slices, honey, pickles, jelly—and the agate teapot, steaming. The room was warm and the air heavy with the odor of baking dough.

There was no shadow on Amandy's face. It radiated importance. "Now jest set right down here, Mis' Phillips. You must be clean tuckered out traipsin' round the place. Hope you're hungry. I beat up some biscuits for I calculated you'd have an edge to your appetite. And if you don't think that plum jell the best you ever tasted, my name ain't Amandy Meegs."

Martha flushed scarlet. Oh, Amandy had spoiled everything! And it had been so nice. She did not look at her visitor's face for fear she would find her laughing. And she could not bear that.

But Mrs. Phillips sat down with a little eager exclamation. "How good everything looks! This is delightful. I'm so glad you made biscuits. And hot tea! It's so much more refreshing. O, don't be formal. Do sit down with us, Miss Meegs. I am going to eat something of everything on the table. Really, I'm quite famished."

Amandy sat down behind the agate teapot. She dished out some salad. "Now you jest pass your plate a second time, Mis' Phillips, if you've a mind to. And help yourself to the meat. Too bad Mis' Judith ain't here. She's down at her stepson's. His wife's expectin' a baby and Mis' Judith thinks she's needed there

more'n she's needed here. I've lived here off'n on all my life so I guess I can do for Mart's folks, well as she can. Now, isn't that plum jell the best you ever et?"

But after a little Martha did not mind Amandy, or the loaded table, or anything. Mrs. Phillips appeared to be genuinely enjoying the spread, enjoying Amandy. And she was not laughing at her. She asked for the second helping of salad. She ate three biscuits. She begged Amandy to give her the recipe of the plum jelly.

And when she went away she promised to come again. And she made Martha promise to come to Middletown. "My house there will seem stupid after this, but I should love to know you better."

Martha watched the little gray car go down the road. Then she stood in the door for a moment and looked out over Twin Farms. Somehow her visitor had touched it with a magic. A kingdom!

She felt a sudden great longing to see Willa. There had been something about Mrs. Phillips that was so like Willa, that natural kindliness that would not laugh at Amandy, or Amandy's ways, or think the old-fashioned things around the place crude and homely. It seemed as though somehow Mrs. Phillips must know Willa.

Behind her Amandy was still talking of their guest. "Now there's a real lady! Too bad Rachel wasn't to home. I'm sorry now we didn't show her those tidies your Aunt Judith made last winter. She certainly licked her plate as clean as a whistle. I guess folks

like that, with hired help as shiftless as 'tis, don't get much real, good, home-cookin'."

Martha went in to give Amandy a hand in cleaning up. Amandy's tongue was flying but Martha scarcely heard a word. She was busy thinking of Mrs. Phillips. O, there was so much to think about her—a very store of treasure that would last a long time. What she had looked like. What she had said, all that about the flowers and about the farm being a kingdom. That was funny but it was nice, too. She wouldn't tell Rachel or Blair about *that*. But she wished that they had heard what Mrs. Phillips had said about the cities. She would go to see her the very first chance she got. She wanted to ask her if she knew Willa and Mr. Demy. She wanted to tell her about Willa. Father couldn't mind that. But she never went.

"Where's Blair?" asked Amariah Bradshaw when he came in to the house.

"He's down in the village playing baseball. They're practising for that game with the Middletown boys. Don't you remember he asked you if he could go?" Martha added, a little anxiously. Talking fast to forestall Amandy, she told father of Mrs. Phillips' visit, how Mrs. Phillips had helped her weed the garden. She sat on the arm of her father's chair as she talked.

Suddenly Rachel rushed into the room. Her breath was coming in hard, frightened gasps. Her face was a ghastly white. She dropped by her father's side and clung to him.

"What's happened?" Amariah Bradshaw cried.

Martha, beside him, felt him stiffen as though for some shock. She herself was frigid with alarm.

"It's—it's—Blair! He's hurt. I—I saw the crowd—and—I went—over— They're bringing him —I ran—" The words came over wrenching sobs. Rachel was shuddering terribly.

"Where is he hurt? *How* is he hurt?" Father had sprung from his chair.

"O, father, I can't—tell it! A ball hit him. He—he—can't see— Father, *he's—blind!*" And suddenly Rachel lay quite still in a faint.

It was Martha who screamed out, a shrill, wounded cry.

"No, no, *not blind!* No, *no!*" And then she turned and ran swiftly from the house down the road.

CHAPTER XVII

THE VERDICT

FATHER had told Martha to go down to meet Aunt Judith. Aunt Judith was coming on the three-forty in response to the telegram Rachel had sent her. And Amandy had told Martha to go early to do some errands.

Martha thought Amandy had trumped up the errands so as to keep her away from the house—and Blair. She thought father sent her, instead of Jerry, to meet Aunt Judith to keep her out of the house and away from Blair. And that was all she wanted to do, to stay close to Blair and his groping hands. Why couldn't Rachel have come, instead of her? Rachel who sat around weeping all the time. Rachel wouldn't see when Blair might want something.

She sat very straight in the middle of the buggy seat and stared between the horse's ears at the dusty winding ribbon of road. Her eyes were circled with dark shadows and pricked with dryness. She felt all dry and hard inside. Her heart was a hard dry lump in her breast. She couldn't cry. She didn't want to cry, like Rachel. She felt a scornful contempt for Rachel. Rachel huddled in corners and mopped her eyes with silly little balls of handkerchiefs but that didn't help Blair. Why should she or Rachel cry when it was Blair who was bearing the pain, the fearful, horrible blackness?

She hated with her whole soul going into Cross' store. Everyone she met there might question her and she couldn't bear to answer their questions. She wouldn't say to anyone; "Blair's blind." She wouldn't put it into words. That would make it so. And it mustn't be. "No! No!" With each beat her heart had been echoing her first cry. All night it had beaten out its "No! No!"; all through the night as she lay, wide-eyed and still, on her bed, straining to pick out the sounds from father's room where they had taken Blair. All through this endless day it had ached its "No! No!"

She wouldn't tell Aunt Judith that Blair couldn't see, just that he'd been hurt. It hadn't been anyone's fault. He'd been playing ball with the others, as he'd played time and time again and someone had called to him and he'd looked away and taken off his face mask and when he turned back— She couldn't think any further than that. But Dr. Merriweather had sent to Burlington for a Dr. Wade, who was a specialist. He was coming this very afternoon and he'd do something that would make everything all right. He *must*.

She stalked into the general store, tight-lipped, her eyes averted. She put Amandy's list on the counter and stood rigid, waiting, consumed with dread. But no one of the many gathered there said a word to her. Their neighborly solicitude, always so easy of expression, could find no voice against her pitifulness. Even at the station old Joe Purcell, who served as telegraph operator and ticket seller, only said: "Guess you'll be

glad your Aunt Judith's coming home," and walked away. Afterwards he told Mary Purcell that he'd "never seen a kid lookin' like Mart Bradshaw looked. You couldn't tell whether Blair Bradshaw was dead 'n buried or whether he wan't hurt at all. She looked all locked up—that's how she looked."

To Martha's intense relief Aunt Judith did not cry. She loaded her bags and innumerable boxes tied with string into the buggy and climbed in briskly herself. Rachel's telegram had told her little more than that Blair had been hurt. That meant that she must return at once to Twin Farms and "straighten things out" there. Most of Aunt Judith's life had been spent in "straightening things out." Almost in this same way had she come to Greenbury thirteen years ago when a telegram from Amariah had told her Martha's mother was dying. And she had stayed to take care of Amariah's house and his "young ones" until the telegram had come from the Charlie Pickerings. All the way on the train, like the general she was, she had been mentally assembling her forces, planning her campaign of "straightening." As she rode beside Martha in the buggy she appeared more concerned in whether Amandy had begun her pickling than in Blair's hurt. And had Amandy let the curtains in the sitting-room get pot-black? And had she remembered to put away the wool blankets?

Upon reaching Twin Farms, however, Aunt Judith did not say anything about the pickling. Rachel met her at the door and clung to her, weeping hysterically.

Amandy took her baggage and sniffled something that sounded like: "This is a dreadful homecomin', Mis' Judith, a dreadful homecomin'!" And Amariah simply shook her hand and turned away. Aunt Judith stood in the middle of the kitchen floor and looked from one to the other and when she spoke there was a quaver of alarm under the high-pitched crispness of her voice.

"I don't see as there's any use you all looking as if I'd come just in time for the funeral. Amandy, are those the breakfast dishes not washed yet? Rachel Bradshaw, you're as limp as though you'd been pulled through a knothole. Stop your crying and take my stuff upstairs. And I wouldn't mind a bite to eat and a cup of tea. Those robbers wanted so much for their sandwiches on the train that I wouldn't buy them. Now, Amariah, where's the boy hurt?"

No one said anything at once. Amariah opened his lips and shut them. Amandy turned to the kitchen sink. Rachel began: "O, Aunt Judith, he's—" but cut short in a sob. Martha ran out of the room. "No! No!" Her heart was storming. "He's *not*—that!"

She went to father's room. While they were all down in the kitchen she would have Blair to herself. The room was dark. Amandy had drawn the curtains. Blair was huddled in the middle of the wide old-fashioned bed. He lay very still, only now and then his hands moved—groped out, then clenched in a convulsion of anguish.

Martha caught and held those poor hands. "It'll be all right, Blair. It'll be all right just as soon as that new doctor comes." It seemed as though she must somehow pour her hope into Blair's soul! "He'll do something." She repeated it. Oh, if only Blair would talk to her. If only he'd tell her something he wanted, that she might serve him.

"Aunt Judith's here. I met her. She came on the three-forty. Oh, Blair, she had more funny boxes and things. I can't wait to see what's in them—" *See!* She choked on the word. And Blair's hands clenched so hard on hers that they hurt. She went on quickly: "She's ordering Amandy and Rachel around just where she left off. She'll be up here in a minute—" She felt Blair shudder. "Never mind, Blair, maybe to-morrow or the day after you'll be up and around."

But except for those convulsive movements, Blair made no sign that he heard her. He seemed to be in a world apart from her—a world of pain and blackness that was worse than pain. And she must crouch there by his side, strong with a strength and a longing of compassion that could not reach him.

She heard the crunch of wheels under the window. She ran to the window and raised the curtain. "It's the new doctor!" she cried in a glad voice. She went to the bed. "He's come, Blair. And now everything will be all right."

When father came into the room with Dr. Merriweather and a strange, wise-looking man, Martha slipped away. She wanted to stay, to stay and hold

Blair's hands tight, but father nodded to her to go out. She wanted to stay just outside the door and listen, but father must have guessed that she wanted to do that, for he said gruffly: "Go downstairs, Mart. Go down with Rachel and Aunt Judith."

In the kitchen Amandy was doing her dishes, swishing the sudsy water in the pan with a grim vigor that threatened the safety of the plates and cups and saucers. Rachel was peeling potatoes for supper. She had stopped crying. Aunt Judith sat at the table eating thick slices of bread and butter and drinking hot tea in long gulps. She still wore her best black hat with its drape of rusty crepe, and her black gloves lay on the table beside her plate. Now and then she stopped eating to fix a stern eye on something in the room.

"Is that that new saucepan that's as black as a nigger's face, Amandy? That roller towel looks like it had hung there since I went away. How many cans of cherries did you say you got? And the currants weren't as good this year? Like as not that good for nothing of a Jerry forgot to spray 'em. I've always told Amariah he wasn't worth his salt. I don't know what's getting into hired help these days. That's what I said to Charlie Pickering."

Her lunch eaten Aunt Judith examined the pantry shelves, opened the cupboards, looked into the woodshed with an all-searching eye, but Martha noticed that every now and then she stood still and listened. And Rachel, silently peeling the potatoes, her white face bent to the task, now and then held her knife suspended

and listened. Amandy, stalking between sink and china cupboard, listened. Martha, herself, sat straight in a chair, listening. They were all listening—and waiting.

Aunt Judith kept up a flow of talk, about the Charlie Pickerings, about the pallor of Rachel's bent face, "white as a sheet," and about the outrageous fees of doctors.

"Amariah should have asked that man what he was going to charge before he let him through the door," she opined. "Wish I'd been here sooner. Why, that doctor that set Charlie Pickering's leg asked him a pretty price and he set it wrong at that! Seems to me John Merriweather ought to know what to do. Can you hear them talking upstairs, Rachel? They've had time to look at half a dozen boys! Mebbe this one charges by the hour. Charlie Pickering had a plumber one day— Amandy, is that a crack in that pitcher? I've a mind to go upstairs and see for myself what they're doing. You'd think the least they could do would be to move around a little. Mart, seems like you've grown all into legs. You don't look decent. First thing now we'll have to let down your hems." But under her running voice Martha caught that quaver of sharp anxiety.

At last they heard footsteps on the stairs and voices, father's and Dr. Merriweather's familiar tones, soft like a girl's voice, and that other, slow, carefully precise. They had gone into the sitting-room. Martha could not bear the suspense any longer. She crept through the door.

"I think it's a clear case of glaucoma. I have had similar cases, Mr. Bradshaw. I know no better treatment than what I have outlined. Keep the boy as cheerful as you can, that counts for a great deal. And I believe that in twelve months or so—"

Martha ran to the strange doctor. She caught him by the arm. She shook him. "Oh, *no!* You've got to make him well sooner than *that*. Didn't they tell you? He wants to go to Harvard—he's going to be a doctor himself. And he's got lots to study."

Dr. Wade took the two angry hands and restrained them in his own.

"Is a year long, young lady, when compared with a lifetime?" he demanded, gruffly and yet not unkindly. And as Martha shrank from him in mute agreement he turned to Amariah Bradshaw. "Quiet, absolute darkness, are the most important things for the present. I'll look in on him from time to time and Dr. Merriweather here will keep me in touch with his general condition." The Doctor said it very cheerfully as he drew on his chamois gloves. He might have been prescribing a pill every three hours and a dose of soothing syrup at bedtime for anything serious in his face!

"Quiet! Absolute darkness!" The grim words shrieked in Martha's ears. Blair quiet, who so loved action! Absolute darkness—

Father and Dr. Merriweather were following the Burlington doctor out to his car. Aunt Judith and Rachel were waiting to hear from father what the doctors had said. Martha stood still. Against her

dry eyes were flooding long-checked tears. Tears were choking her throat, smothering her heart. But she beat them back. Tears! When Blair— *Quiet. Absolute darkness.* A year. Twelve months—those twelve months that were to have been so full of a great purpose.

To fight the tears she clenched her hands until the nails of her fingers dug painfully into the flesh of her palms. Then with a long shuddering breath she ran swiftly to Blair's room. They had left him alone and he might want something.

The boy lay very still in the wide bed. Over his wounded eyes was folded a soft clean bandage. A strange, faint, sickening smell of antiseptic hung in the air. The room was quiet—and dark.

Now to Martha's yearning, compassionate gaze that huddled form on the bed looked like a little boy's. All the strength, all the fine growing vigor had gone from it. She longed to cradle the dark bandaged head against her breast. For that space of a moment the girl by the bedside was a woman, all mother, suffering with a pity too great for words, for tears.

"Blair!"

He moved his hands toward her. Little-boy hands they seemed. She caught them, held them tight. Her lips opened and shut, opened and shut. The tears beat at her eyes but she fought them. "Blair, he says—he says—why, Blair, you're going to be all right in just a year—"

"A year! *God!*" It was not an oath, it was a

cry for help that burst from those straight tight lips below the white bandage.

"But oh Blair, a year isn't so very long! And then—everything will be all right. I knew it would. And Blair, I'll give every bit of the year to you, see if I don't. Oh, Blair, *let* me! I'd love to. I'll read to you—I'll tell you everything—I'll make you see things— Why, Blair, ten minutes of the year are gone already!" That was such a silly thing to say and all the tight nerves in her body seemed to snap so at once that Martha laughed. And then the laugh broke in a sob, but as she mustn't cry she made herself laugh again, shakily.

He wrenched his hands from her hold with an angry strength. "Mart!" It was more a growl than a word, but it sent a throb of joy to Mart's soul. It was the first time he had spoken to her. She bent toward him swiftly. "Mart, I won't have them all snivelling 'round me. I *won't*. I want to be left alone if they're going to snivel."

"I won't let them, Blair." Martha promised. Oh, to do anything for him! Now his hand reached again for hers, found it, clung to it.

"But, Mart—*you*'re all right. I don't mind you. Stick 'round me, will you? It'll—help."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE YEAR ENDS

THE vivid green of another summer lay over hills and valley, and life at Twin Farms went on in its cycles of work and rest. More work than rest, Amandy would say. Under Aunt Judith's sharp eye the kitchen hummed with its usual activities. Out in the fields Amariah Bradshaw and Jerry toiled. In the flower garden the hollyhocks grew tall and shook out their gay dresses, their "gingham dresses." Martha's nasturtiums blared a new symphony.

There were changes, many. No long-legged boy burst into the kitchen with a noisy: "Say, isn't dinner ready?" No one grumbled that he was too "dog-gone" tired to wash his hands, or teased Rachel and Mart and Amandy or flung himself scowling off to give Jerry a "hand" at milking. Blair lived his days in father's room, silently for the most part. He never laughed or teased anyone. Around the straight, tight lips were lines that had not been there before. Loving hands had gathered about him his own possessions, on a table near to him was the little pile of books he had planned to read, but he never touched them. Father's own chair had been taken up from the living-room for his comfort and it stood close to the shuttered window where he might feel the breeze, but he sat in it like one inert, waiting for his hours to slip into days and his days into weeks.

Subtly a change had crept over Rachel and Aunt Judith and Amandy. Amandy's tongue wagged as fast as of yore but its acidness was tempered. Now to her, sharp words seemed unfitting in a house so stricken as Twin Farms; she took to singing hymns in a sepulchral monotone. She scrubbed to the plaint: "I want to be like Jesus." "Onward Christian Soldiers" lifted above the rattle of her milk pans. She "tuckered herself out" in cooking "tasty" things for the "poor boy" and found satisfaction in her fatigue. Aunt Judith still busied herself from dawn to dark in keeping her household "straightened out," but now she found less fault with things in general and Amandy in particular and, like Amandy, made "doing" for Blair the high rite of her every day. Rachel had developed a sweetness of nature that gave an added charm to her pretty face. She no longer closeted herself in her own room; she helped Amandy and Aunt Judith willingly. She never sighed now over her lot that kept her in Greenbury. She rode often with Jamie Allan and more than once Amandy, watching her go off in the early evening for a gallop over the hills, nodded significantly, her tongue in her cheek.

Perhaps no one but Martha noticed the change the year had worked in Amariah Bradshaw. No one but Martha caught the shadow that settled sometimes over his face or that he did not sit now, ever, on the porch or in the wide barn door and look out upon his possessions. To Martha there was something sad in father's not doing that. He went often to Blair's room but he

did not talk to the boy much. Martha guessed that it was hard for father to talk and when he looked at Blair with that sorrow in his eyes she wanted to go and throw her arms about his neck. Poor father, Martha thought. He was so sorry for Blair and he did not know how to show it. He shut it all up inside of him until it hurt.

And Martha, more than any of them, had changed. The months had added height to her. As she swung up the road this day in midsummer, she did not look like the Martha who had stood in the garden that unforgettable afternoon hoeing her carrots and beans. Her long legs had lost their awkwardness, maybe because Aunt Judith had seen to it that her dress was a "decent" length. There was less of the colt about her; something of the delicacy of a woman in the budding. There was still the tilted nose, spattered with golden freckles, her hair still grew from its "widow's peak" over her forehead, her pointed chin still had its little characteristic way of thrusting itself inquisitively forward, but the eyes were different. They had lost the sparkle with which they had looked out upon a very good if limited world; now they mirrored a heart that knew a suffering too confounding for it to understand, knew a deep compassion it could not speak, tears that must not be shed. They were wide and set deep in the oval face that had thinned from childish plumpness to a more delicate contour.

Martha had given the year to Blair in a passion of service. The others, Aunt Judith and Rachel and

Amandy, even father, had served Blair tirelessly with their hands, but she had served him with her very being. She had made her every breath his, her every thought, her every concern. She had lived for him.

She had kept her promise to stand between him and the pity he had dreaded. Not long after Dr. Wade had pronounced his verdict she had rebuked the others, stormily. "How can Blair keep cheerful if you go 'round on tiptoe as though someone was dead in the house? His ears are all right—and his eyes will be unless we—we—*act* as though they won't!"

"It doesn't seem fittin' to laugh when—" Amandy began solemnly.

"*I* think you're heartless," Rachel broke in with some spirit. "Maybe *you* can go on acting as though nothing terrible had happened but *I* can't."

Then Martha had stamped her foot. "I'm *not* heartless! But I won't *let* you make Blair feel worse than he does! I *won't.*" And her childish anger was so genuine and her intent so earnest that the others had been impressed and had heeded what she had said. If Rachel cried any more after that it was when no one could see her. And it was after that Amandy had taken to chanting her hymns.

Valiantly Martha had tried to bring to Blair the little world he had known. She told him every happening of the village, bringing her news from every source she could find, telling it with a vividness that finally broke through Blair's apathy. She brought the changing seasons to him: "The boys are sledding on the

ridge road, Blair. Do you remember that day you broke Sally Martin's sled and nearly broke your own nose?" "Billy Deming tried the ice on Dyett's Pond. It's thawing out fast and he went through and Georgie Miles pulled him out. He looked just like a *rat!*" There was all the school gossip, trivial and mostly concerning the girls, but Martha made it good telling. She had gone home early one day to report the first run of sap. She had found the first arbutus and had put it in Blair's hands. When she had heard that far-off cry of the wild geese flying northward she had held in her joy until Blair could share it. It all meant, the breaking of the ice on Dyett's Pond, the arbutus struggling up through the melting snows, the call of the flying geese, that the days were going!

O, it was not a lost year, for she was very close to Blair. Through that wall that his plight seemed to have built around him Martha had found a way. She knew that Blair waited for her coming; Blair smiled for her, sometimes, even laughed. He'd talk with her. He didn't talk much with the others.

Often they talked about Mr. Demy and Willa. Together they lived over again their brief friendship. Often Blair wished that he knew where Mr. Demy was. Martha did not think that father would mind Blair's just wishing that. It could go no further.

Blair's chums had come frequently to Twin Farms to see him, come shyly, sat awkwardly with him, tongue-tied, abashed before his infirmity. And invariably they had left Blair more despondent, more grimly

silent. When Martha observed the effect these pals had on Blair she made a point of joining them. Her chatter could cover the lapses, her laughter lighten their awkwardness. She had made Ted talk of the Middletown school. "Think, Blair, you'll be there next year!" she had broken in more than once. Jamie Allan came often and Blair did not mind him. He called Blair "old fellow" but it was not in pity, it was more as man to man. Sometimes when Jamie was there Rachel joined them and then Martha would slip away.

Martha read a great deal to Blair but never from the precious books Blair once had fingered so proudly. She had begged to read from them but Blair had refused to listen. "Blair, I can read them! And they're the books you wanted to read!"

"Not yet," Blair had answered surlily. So she had waited. But on Miss Everett's desk one day she had found a book of poems and she had asked Miss Everett if she might take it home to read the verses to Blair. And Blair had liked them. The sing-song of Martha's voice had soothed him; he liked the lines. Martha had caught him repeating some of them to himself. And then she had told him what Mrs. Phillips had said, that long-ago day in the garden, about the blind poet who had written about beauty of the flowers she had never seen.

"Mrs. Phillips said, 'She *felt* things—the things that we see and she wrote wonderful poems about them all, flowers and the sea and the hills—everything.'"

It had not been easy for Martha to tell Blair that and she looked at him, a little frightened.

"Poor devil!" he had muttered, but he had said it gently as though he felt terribly sorry for that other. And Martha, with an instinct born of the maturity she was acquiring, knew that it was good for Blair to feel sorry for someone besides himself.

She borrowed other books of verse from Miss Everett and read them to Blair. She divined the lines Blair liked best and learned them with him. She made a game of it. She and Blair kept it their secret. "Don't you let anyone know what we're doing," Blair had commanded. "The fellows would guy me to death —spouting poetry like a girl!" But the little play brought a rare and lasting beauty to them.

During the winter evenings Martha took her school books into Blair's room to study them there and feigned desperation over her geometry problems so that Blair would help her. She liked to hear him say: "Why, dumb-bell, that's as simple as rolling off a log!" And then he would explain it to her. "Next year you'll be doing Trig, won't you, Blair?" she invariably would remind him.

She had abandoned her intention of planting a bigger garden patch, for now she had Blair's to tend. She gave his bit of land more care than her own. She wanted it to be especially fine for Blair to see, when—

She cared for Blair's livestock, too. This spring Blair's cow had her calf in the pasture and Martha

could have hugged her for the excitement it brought about.

"Belle's had her calf in the pasture and Jerry can't find it. She's hidden it somewhere in the brush, Jerry thinks," she had told Blair. And then for three days she had helped Jerry hunt the calf, three days of alarm for her and Blair lest the animal perish.

"Belle's the cutest," she reported one noon, breathlessly. "She goes out to pasture with the other cows and stays with them as long as Jerry is around. You wouldn't ever think she owned a calf, heartless beast!"

But on the fourth day Jerry had outwitted the mother-instinct. As he approached a thicket in a far end of the pasture he had observed Belle showing some restlessness. When he sauntered in another direction Belle had joined the rest of the herd with as much nonchalance as a cow can assume but Jerry had noticed that she did not graze, that she kept her soft eyes on his every movement. And that evening when the cows were in the barnyard he and Martha had gone back to the thicket and had found the little calf.

"It was as wild as anything, Blair. We couldn't catch it at first. And it was terribly frightened. When Jerry finally cornered it it was trembling so that it couldn't stand. And the mother *isn't* heartless. Jerry says that a cow tries to keep her calf hidden like that so no one will take it away from her. Imagine a cow knowing enough to do that. She's a darling little heifer, Blair. What will you call it? I know a grand name, only it's a little long, 'Babe in the Woods.' Do you like that?"

So Babe the newcomer was named. And one day when Amandy and Aunt Judith were busy in the milk house Martha dragged the calf up to Blair's room so that he might "see" with his hands what a fine big Babe it was.

Watching Blair fondle the little animal had inspired Martha to buy him a dog. The next day she had come home from school with a black and white setter pup at the end of a piece of clothes-line. "I bought it from Cass Judd for two dollars. I bought it for Blair," she had explained, an edge defiantly, to Aunt Judith and Amandy. She had patted the head that was hiding forlornly under her skirts. "His name is Dickens. Mrs. Judd said he was the dickens of a nuisance and I thought right off that would be a cute name—that is, if Blair likes it." She had gone with her treasure to Blair's room. And Blair had loved the dog from the moment it laid its head on his knee. Amandy's fears that Dickens would live up to his name were ungrounded, for after that the dog rarely left Blair's room.

O, no, this year was not lost for Martha! Full to its every moment, it was with a comradeship the sweeter for its heartaches, the finer for the tender service it exacted. Rarely she and Blair exchanged even so much as a caressing word; it was "dumb-bell," "silly," "crosspatch," "kid" between them, but their voices rang deep with their unspoken affection. When, after some little attention, Blair would say gratefully: "You're a good sort, Mart," Martha's heart brimmed with contentment.

And now the year was almost behind them. In a week it would be over. Dr. Wade would come and remove the bandages from Blair's dear eyes—she herself would open wide the blinds of the windows and let the sunlight flood in. Walking homeward over the road from the village, Martha thought just how she would do it. What would Blair see first? She hoped it would be the hollyhocks. They were so gorgeously dressed just now; they looked like a host of elegant ladies. Or perhaps Blair would look at father.

As she passed the little bend by the pine trees in front of the Miles farm she saw an automobile in the yard at Twin Farms. She recognized it at once as Dr. Wade's car. Her heart stopped. Perhaps he had come, now, to— She broke into a run. She ran swiftly. O, she might not be there in time to open the blinds.

There was no one in the kitchen when she entered it. But she scarcely noticed that. In the sitting-room Amandy was sitting on the edge of a chair, her big knuckled hands clasped tight over her breast. But Martha did not notice her. Straight to Blair's room she ran.

The blinds were open. Golden pools of sunlight lay across the floor. Martha was vaguely conscious of Aunt Judith and Rachel in a corner, of their faces white and strained and frightened. Dr. Wade stood near the door, his head bent. He dwarfed little Doc Merriweather, beside him. And father sat on a chair.

"Blair!" Martha's lips formed the word, but she made no sound. For she had seen her father, seen how

he sat in his chair, his head bowed to his chest, his great hands hanging by his side. She *knew.*

Slowly, fearfully, she turned to Blair where he sat by the window. The bandage was gone but the dear eyes were staring into space, unseeing.

She crossed to him swiftly. She did not mind these others. She dropped beside the chair and threw her arms about Blair's neck and laid her cheek against his. She trembled violently and dared not trust herself to speak lest she give way to the bitter hopelessness that was crashing over her.

Blair must have thought they were alone. "Never mind, Mart," he said, and the queer sound of his voice, the *old* sound, stabbed Martha to the heart. "Don't cry, kid. Don't cry." His hand found hers. "I—I've got to stand it and—if—you—cry—"

"I won't cry, Blair." The promise came on a long sobbing sigh.

"I never thought it would do any good, Mart. Have they gone?"

She looked over her shoulder but she felt no surprise to find that the others had slipped out of the room, even father. She had forgotten them.

"They've gone downstairs, Blair."

"He—Dr. Wade says—that maybe— But what's the use of thinking about it? I'm not the only one in the world who—can't—see." A convulsion of feeling shook the boy but he pulled himself together. "But, Mart, I—I wish Mr. Demy knew. He could help me. I know it. He'd show me—how to stand it! O, Mart—he'd say 'Front face.' You know—"

CHAPTER XIX

IN THE BARN

Aunt Judith and Martha were making a dress. It was for Martha and very properly a grownupish dress, for in three weeks Martha would enter the Middletown High. They sat on the kitchen porch sewing. Aunt Judith was hemming the skirt and Martha was making buttonholes in the blouse, her fingers slowly and clumsily drawing the thread backward and forward, backward and forward. Amandy sat at the other end of the porch, husking corn for supper.

"Goodness, don't seem no time when you were a little tad, Mart, startin' off to school with Blair and cryin' cause you didn't think there was enough cookies in the lunch box. Rachel was always one to fuss over her clothes but you didn't set much notion on how you looked—you thought of your stomach. It certainly seems jest yesterday. Don't you rec'lect, Mis' Judith, how cute her and Blair looked?"

For a moment Martha could not see her buttonhole. She wished Amandy had not said that. In three weeks she would start off for Middletown, go in each morning on the seven-forty, go alone—

Martha had planned asking father to let her stay home. She could not bear to go to Middletown without Blair. But Blair himself had guessed her intent and had killed it. "Just because my plans got knocked

flat, don't you go and act silly," he had rebuked her. However she anticipated the change only with dread where once she would have felt keen pleasure.

Aunt Judith threaded her needle and sighed. Perhaps *she* was thinking of that September day when little Martha, in her clean starched dress and her neat pigtails, had started off to school in Blair's care. "A lot's happened at Twin Farms, a lot that Amariah hasn't reckoned on! Roger and Dick gone and Joan and Molly. And now Blair—"

"Well, I'm learnin' that there ain't much use reckonin' on things anyway," answered Amandy, with ready philosophy. "Mebbe Amariah set too much store by his plans and the Almighty thought he was takin' things out of His Own Hands. Mebbe the Almighty didn't want Blair to be a doctor. Seems to me there're too many now by all accounts, and I don't see that they know such a lot anyway. Here Blair could've been learnin' the blind language all that while he was settin' upstairs in the dark."

"Don't!" cried Martha so passionately that the two women looked at her in alarm. And neither rebuked her or made any answer at once.

It was everyone's acceptance of Blair's pass that tore at Martha's heart. He had taken his place again in the life at Twin Farms, but a silent groping boy, idle for the most part, his poor eyes hidden by ugly dark glasses. And the others of the household had fitted their ways to meet the change just as they had moved the furniture to safe corners where Blair would

not knock against it as he felt his path from room to room.

Martha had lost that warming feeling she had had of Blair's being especially hers. Now Aunt Judith or Amandy or Rachel were almost always around. And something in Blair's own resignation made a difference. He seemed older—older and removed from them all by something more than years. It was as though he merely sat in with them, listening and yet scarcely listening, unseeing. Behind his quiet was a bitterness that had no fire—cold like the ashes of what had been a fire, a fine fire of youth and youth's dreaming.

Father had usurped her place with Blair. He had hired another man to help Jerry and he hung around the house, hung around Blair. It was father who steadied Blair down the stairs, led him from room to room. He took him out to the barns. Martha could see father pointing to this thing and that as he talked to Blair. One evening he coaxed Blair to ride with him down to the village. There was clumsy gentleness in father's manner toward Blair as though he were trying to soften the sharp corners of himself so that they should never hurt Blair. Martha wondered if father ever thought that, now, he would have Blair always at Twin Farms.

Blair was off somewhere with father this afternoon while she sat and made buttonholes to get ready to go to the Middletown High and listened to Amandy and Aunt Judith.

" Have you ever calculated, Mis' Judith, that mebbe

there's somethin' between Rachel and Jamie Allan?" demanded Amandy. She gathered her husks in her capacious apron but she made no move to stir from her chair.

Aunt Judith didn't know as she had, but Amandy did not need her encouragement.

"Seems to me she's sort o' soft on him. A weddin' here might brighten things up a bit. But I don't know as it would with Blair blind." From whatever conversational point Amandy started now she was certain to get back to Blair. "'Twould be a sad weddin' after all. Dear me, whoever'd thought things would come to this here at Twin Farms—'specially to Blair. Now if it'd been Mart that had been struck blind I wouldn't a been a mite surprised. You could expect most anything to happen to her, bein' the seventh child of a seventh child!"

"I wish I *could* take Blair's place," put in Martha, soberly. She had wished it very often, in a futile way.

They saw the buggy coming up the road and at once Amandy and Aunt Judith began to adjust things to Blair's return. Amandy moved her rocker back into a corner. Aunt Judith lifted her sewing basket into her lap though there was not the slightest chance of its getting in Blair's way. Amandy said: "Here's Blair," with the sh-sh-ing in her voice.

Oh, it couldn't always be like that! Martha ran into the house. She could not bear to watch father help Blair out of the buggy; she could not bear that Blair's

eyes—even his unseeing eyes—should find her getting ready to go to Middletown!

She went to her own room and shut the door. She was still holding the blouse on which she had been working. With an angry impulse, she threw it from her, hating it fiercely, hating what it meant, hating the circumstances that were sending her, strong and seeing, to Middletown while Blair stayed home. If, as Amandy had put it, this was the Almighty's plan, something seemed wrong, unfair in it. She wouldn't accept it, as the others did. And she did not know what to do.

Martha was too young to consider that the Heavenly Father might see a perfection for Blair that she could not now appreciate. She forgot the blind poet who so "felt" beauty with her soul that she could put it into living words. She knew only Blair's present plight, to be led from corner to corner by whomever was around, to sit somewhere out of everyone's way, quiet, brooding, with no part in the activities around him.

She glared at her own reflection in the glass. Why hadn't it been she who had been "struck blind," as Amandy loved to put it?

Suddenly she began to tremble. All of Amandy's careless words came back to her. Involuntarily her eyes lifted to the tin lid in the wall that concealed her box of promises. She could not bear Blair's infirmity for him but she might—

She had never forgotten Blair's cry for Mr. Demy. Perhaps—perhaps she could bring Mr. Demy back

again. *That* would help Blair. Mr. Demy would tell him how to face it all. She had sent Aunt Judith away. Just once she'd break her promise that she had made, just once, to bring Mr. Demy back.

She shivered in a sharp revulsion of distaste, not so much at breaking the solemn promise, she'd do that for Blair, but at the feeling of again invoking that inner power that made her different. But she'd do it.

All through the rest of the day she was strangely absorbed. And when the supper dishes were washed and put away she slipped out unobserved to the barn. It was an eerie place, in the twilight. Great silvery cobwebs hung from the rafters; the corners were filled with shadows that moved like pale ghosts. There was a heavy smell of dust and old wood. It was very still.

To Martha it was haunted with those happy moments when she and Blair had hid there to exchange talk of Mr. Demy and Willa. All at once that seemed only yesterday; she could almost hear Blair's voice in her ear, vibrant with boyish eagerness. All his high hopes had been shaping then in his heart.

"Mr. Demy's great! He knows just what a fellow wants to know and feeds it to him!"

"O, Mr. Demy, come back. Blair needs you! He needs you now!" She whispered it over and over. Somewhere, somehow Mr. Demy must hear her. Blair's need *must* reach him. Why, Mr. Demy might teach Blair how to laugh again! If Blair would laugh just once—

Unconsciously she had knelt. There were little

stirrings from the shadowy corners as mice scampered to hiding, but she did not heed them. The cobwebs swung over her head, the dim light grew to almost darkness, but she did not stir. She knelt, rigid, tense with the one thought. "O, Mr. Demy, come!" Moments passed, one after another.

Then all at once she felt tears on her cheeks. They came in a flood running down her face and splashing on her dress. She could not stop them. It frightened her a little because she could not stop them. She crumpled in a heap on the dusty floor and covered her face. But it was good to cry, to cry all the tears that had been welling inside her for months and months. No one could see her. No one would know.

How long she lay there Martha could never reckon for minutes meant nothing to her then. But at last exhaustion overcame her and brought with it a slight nausea of faintness. And after awhile she groped her way to the door and ran with unsteady steps toward the frame of light that was the kitchen door.

She was glad that she encountered no one. She got to her room unobserved. She shut her door behind her, lighted her candle with shaking hands. She still felt faint, a little sick. She thought it was the working of her inner power and she hated it, but she endured it for she had done it for Blair. Oh, she wished she could tell him that now Mr. Demy would come! She was *sure* he would come.

CHAPTER XX

A LETTER

"Two letters for your folks, Marty," the postmaster said beaming upon Martha through his square window. "One for you and one for Rachel."

Martha took them from him. She stared so intently at the envelope addressed to her in a strange handwriting that she did not hear his: "How's the boy this morning?"

With her letters she hurried through the little group hanging around the post-office door. Rachel's was from Molly so she put that in her pocket. But her own she carried in her hand. She did not want to open it at once. She liked to enjoy the mystery of the sealed envelope.

It might be from Willa. But she did not think it was Willa's handwriting. It might be *about* Willa. She spelled out Chatham on the postmark. She did not know where Chatham was. It was all delightfully mysterious. She felt important, excited.

And up to the moment of the postmaster putting the envelope into her hand her morning had gone badly for her. Amandy, upon seeing the pale face she presented in the kitchen, had forced her to take a generous dose of sticky medicine. Martha had submitted to it simply to avoid Amandy's questioning. And then, in accordance with her written and sworn word, she had

taken her seal ring to Nelly Howe. And Nelly had refused it.

Martha had not wanted to give the ring to Nelly. She loved it. She thought it very pretty. Dick had given it to her one Christmas. She had had difficulty in planning an explanation that would not disclose to Nelly that she was giving her the ring because she had broken a "promise." But Nelly had made any explanation unnecessary. She had laughed at the ring.

"I don't blame you for not wanting to wear it—it's so plain. But you don't suppose *I'd* wear it, do you? Mamma's promised me a ring for Christmas and I'm going to pick it out, myself." Martha, her face a deep scarlet, had dropped the ring in her pocket.

But now she forgot Nelly's scorn. The road that led from the village to Twin Farms stretched before her, deserted. She broke the sealed flap of the envelope.

"Why—why—it's from the Governor's wife," she exclaimed aloud, standing still.

"My dear little friend," it began. The words danced so before Martha's excited eyes that she could not make them out for a moment.

"I have had only recently a letter from a friend in Middletown telling me of the trouble that has come to you. Somehow I cannot associate such tragedy with the peace and loveliness of your hillside home. I am filled with pity for your brother and for you because I know how your heart must ache over him. Has everything been done that can be done? I am going to take the liberty of suggesting that you consult a

Dr. Rasin, of New York City. His work abroad during the war was more than marvellous. The hospital staffs in France came to believe he could almost perform miracles. After the war he came to this country. Your own physician must know of him. It sometimes is hard to reach him for he is only in his private hospital a month or so at a time, but I know him personally and I know he happens to be there now. And I know he is the human kind that will journey gladly to your corner. I pray your father will not think that I am presumptuous, but I cannot help but hope that something may still be done to help your brother. Do write to me, Miss Martha. I often think with deep pleasure of the happy afternoon you gave me. I wondered why I never saw you after that, but now I understand—"

Martha never read beyond that. She sat down abruptly on a boulder at the side of the road and stared at those few lines. Her heart was hammering in her breast. This doctor with the strange name had done marvellous things—he would come here, to Greenbury, and make Blair well.

She wanted to laugh aloud and she wanted to cry all at one and the same moment. She lifted the white paper and kissed it. Then she sprang to her feet. She must find father, tell father about this doctor who had done marvellous things.

Father was not in the house so she went to the barns to find him. He had just brought the team up from the fields. She simply put the letter into his

hands, too breathless to make any explanation. Then she stood by, her eyes hard on his face as he read it.

When father did not say anything at once Martha caught his arm. "Father, you'll send for him, won't you?" she cried, imploringly.

"I don't know. Maybe this don't amount to anything. Dr. Wade's as good as anyone, I suppose."

"You *want* Blair to get well, don't you, father?" Martha asked slowly, sick with a moment's horrid doubt.

At that father turned on her such a look of hurt that she threw her arms around his neck in a passion of remorse.

"Don't ever say anything like that again, Mart. Don't *ever*."

Father went on to the house, then, with the letter in his pocket and Martha followed him. At the door he turned to her and said in a heavy undertone, "Not a word about this to anyone, child."

It was hard for Martha to keep the secret, with Blair sitting in his corner. It was hard to keep from watching father's face as he ate his dinner in silence. It was hard not to tell them all just that she had had a letter from the Governor's wife, a letter that began: "My dear little friend." She could not eat any dinner herself so that Amandy, observing her untouched food, declared that she was "comin' down with something sure as preachin' and ought to stick her feet in hot mustard water."

But when, dinner over, father told Aunt Judith

that he was going to Burlington on the afternoon train and wouldn't be home to supper—maybe not until the next day, Amandy could not have thought Martha ailing! Her eyes shone like two stars, her cheeks took on the color of the pinkest of the hollyhocks. And a note of laughter trembled in her voice that had not been there for long months.

Any financial difficulties in meeting the expense of such a consultation as Mrs. Phillips suggested did not exist for Martha; if they had occurred to her she would have dismissed them at once. She would hold that they could all be beggared and yet be rich, if Blair only could be made well!

She thought of nothing else all through the afternoon. She went into the garden to pick beans for Amandy to pickle and she coaxed Blair to let her lead him out with her. With her hand tucked under his arm to guide his uncertain steps it was harder than ever not to tell why father had gone to Burlington.

It was very warm in the garden. Martha found a corner out of the sun for Blair and where she could chatter to him while she picked the beans. She did not mind that he did not talk to her. And when her basket was full she carried it in to Amandy and came back and sat down with Blair. Dickens curled at their feet.

Excitement had tired Martha. It was good to rest beside Blair, to relax to the drowsiness of the summer afternoon. Little shimmers of heat waved across the green of vegetable patch and flower garden and lost

themselves in the pools of shadow under the giant elms. In their corner the marigolds shone like a copper carpet. A sweet fragrance of clover and drying hay filled the air. The nearer hills shone emerald green in the sun. The hollyhocks curtseyed to the breeze.

"The hollyhocks are taller than I am, Blair!" Involuntarily Martha spoke aloud something of her thought.

"I don't know how tall you are, kid," Blair answered quickly, with that hard tone in his voice that so often had baffled Martha but that had no power to do so now. "I heard Aunt Judith say you'd grown out of everything." And then he put out his hand and laid it on Martha's shoulder.

The unwonted caress, the awkwardness of it, the wistfulness behind his words went straight to Martha's heart.

"Blair, I think—things—are—going to be—better," she stammered.

"Better—" he groaned. "I counted the clock ticking the other night. Sixty seconds are a long time when you count 'em off. And sixty years! Why, I may live to be sixty years old—live like this!"

"Blair!" She *had* to tell him something. She couldn't tell him about the new doctor who might make him well but she could tell him about Mr. Demy, maybe, coming. "Blair, I—I've worked my power—to bring Mr. Demy back!" Why, it was not so hard to say aloud to Blair that she had this inner power.

"Your power!" Blair was derisive.

She told him then of sending Aunt Judith away to avenge her drowning the kittens and of the promise she had made to herself to never, never invoke again this supernatural control given her by virtue of being the seventh child of a seventh child, which promise she had broken this once. She told him gravely. And she described the sensations she had felt after she had knelt in the barn which convinced her that the "power" had worked again and would bring Mr. Demy back. "He'll come—I know he will," she ended simply.

But to her dismay Blair laughed at her, laughed uproariously. She had thought often that she would give anything to hear Blair laugh again like this, but now it jarred on her. She bit her lips in vexation.

"Oh, you dumb-bell! Why, that's all Amandy's nonsense. You sent Aunt Judith away, did you?" He hugged his knees and swayed from side to side in his mirth.

"I certainly did. I asked for a sign to punish her —something to send her away and she went, didn't she? When we got home from meeting there was the telegram—"

"My word! And you never thought, did you, Mart, that that telegram likely was sent before you went down to the meeting, before you even began to think of using your power to get even? O, you kid!"

Martha had no answer for that. She was held silent by a conflict of feeling, conviction that Blair was right, a great joy that, after all, she was *not* different from anyone else and dismay that perhaps now

Mr. Demy would not come. And she need not have endured Nelly Howe's scorn! Her fingers went involuntarily into her pocket in search of her ring—and closed on Rachel's forgotten letter.

"Oh, goodness me!" she exclaimed under her breath.

"Never mind, kid. You meant all right. I'd like to talk to Mr. Demy more'n anything on this earth. But you cut out all this stuff about having some occult sense. 'Tisn't healthy. You said yourself you felt queer just trying it. Maybe you're intended for some high destiny, but wait 'til it comes—don't go trying to perform miracles. And I guess it would be one if you could get Mr. Demy to set foot in *this* place again!" And the old bitterness closed in on Blair.

"Well, *something's* going to happen," persisted Martha. She meant the new doctor but she did not explain. She jumped to her feet. "I've got to take this letter to Rachel. I forgot it."

"Then likely something *will* happen," retorted Blair. "Go find her. Leave me here. I'm all right."

Martha found Rachel on the porch knitting. She was making a sweater. She wore a white muslin dress and the pink wool in her lap looked like a heap of roses. As her fingers flew she was smiling over some thought of her own. She was still smiling as she took the letter from Martha.

But Martha saw the smile vanish as Rachel read the letter, saw Rachel's face go pale for an instant.

"It's from Molly, isn't it? What did she say?" she asked in alarm.

Rachel did not answer at once. She let the letter drop to her lap and she began to knit, clicking the needles furiously.

"Read it if you want to. She wrote that Con Smith and—and Sue Love—are engaged."

"Con—engaged? Oh, Rachel!" cried Martha. Indignation and pity so mingled in her voice that Rachel laughed. But it was a sharp little laugh and her lips were not smiling.

Martha stared at Rachel, aghast. It had happened —what Amandy said could happen. Con had slipped out of the understanding, leaving Rachel with nothing but the loose end. And how could Rachel go on knitting when this was so? Martha saw ahead for Rachel such years as Amandy had known. "Rachel," she cried. "Wh-what are you going to do?"

"What am I going to do? What do you mean? I'm going to finish this sleeve and then I'm going with Jamie Allan to Middletown while he sees the carpenter about plans for his bungalow."

CHAPTER XXI

MR. DEMY COMES BACK

"He's coming! He's coming!"

Like a whirlwind Martha burst into the kitchen, shouting her news.

"Who's coming?" cried Blair, half-rising from his chair. His face went white. His hands gripped the arms of the chair to steady his trembling.

"Who's comin'? Not to supper I hope," echoed Amandy.

"Who's coming? We're not deaf, Mart, but we will be if you shout like that in our ears," reproved Aunt Judith.

It takes longer to write it than it did for the three of them to ask it. Martha ran to Blair for she knew whom Blair *hoped* was coming, hoped against the odds of his reason. She must tell him it was not Mr. Demy.

"The new doctor," she began, struggling with her breath. "The doctor the Governor's wife wrote about." Then she had to begin again so as to tell them about the letter she had received the day before and concerning which her father had told her to say nothing. But father had talked to Dr. Wade, that was why he had gone to Burlington, and this new doctor was coming and now she could tell.

"Dr. Wade says Dr. Rasin is marvellous. That's what Mrs. Phillips said in the letter. He's done some

cures that are just short of miracles. And—and father stayed while Dr. Wade got him on the telephone. Dr. Wade says it was just luck he found him, for he is only in New York now and then. And—and he's coming here—this very afternoon. Dr. Wade's going to meet him and bring him. O, Blair," and Martha, in her great joy, threw her arms around Blair's neck with a force that pushed him back into his chair.

Blair took her arms roughly from his neck.

"What's the use of any more doctors fussing around," he muttered. It's only a lot more money." But Blair was shaking as though with a chill.

"I hope your father had sense enough to ask what this new man will charge," put in Aunt Judith, practically.

Martha faced her indignantly.

"If he charged a *million* father'd have him. We'd sell Twin Farms, everything, we'd go *begging* to make Blair well! And father did ask." She was glad she could tell Aunt Judith that father asked. "Dr. Rasin said he wouldn't charge *anything*."

This did not satisfy Aunt Judith. "That's funny. Like as not he's some quack and will want Blair to write a testimonial for the newspapers and send his picture. I don't know what Amariah's thinking of."

"Well, he's coming!" retorted Martha, triumphantly.

Amandy shared Martha's excitement. A doctor from New York, even though he was a quack, did not come every day to Twin Farms. Maybe they'd have

to ask him to sit down to supper, maybe ask Dr. Wade, too. She'd make a blackberry pie if Mart would pick the berries.

Martha said she'd pick the berries. She would do anything that would make the hands of the clock seem to move faster. And after a little Aunt Judith came to feel that this day might be different from any other day and she tied a towel over her gray head and began briskly to clean the sitting-room and parlor, Rachel helping her.

Blair alone appeared unmoved. Behind a mask of stony indifference he hid whatever of hope had kindled at Martha's announcement. Martha guessed that he was afraid to think of this new doctor's coming and her heart was full of tender compassion for him as she flew about at Amandy's bidding.

"It's three o'clock, Blair," she whispered, later, coming to his corner. "He'll be here soon—he was going to Burlington and drive down with Dr. Wade, you know."

"Help me get upstairs, Mart," he answered, sharply. "I don't want everyone around." She saw how he was shaking.

She led him up to his room, then lingered uncertainly. "Do you mind me?" she asked.

"Yes, you. Get out, Mart. I want to be left alone, I say." But he sensed Martha's hurt and added quickly. "Sorry, kid—but I've got to get hold of myself. I don't want even you to see what a coward

I am. I wish father hadn't let him come. I—I don't think I can bear it if—he says—"

His face was twitching, his hands were clenched in his effort at control. Coward! Martha longed to cry out a protest at that. Reluctantly she went out and closed the door behind her.

She heard voices, father's heavy tone. They had come—Dr. Wade and the new man. For an instant she leaned weakly against the stair bannister. She wanted to pray but her pounding heart could not shape even a prayer. And then, across father's heavy tone fell another voice, a low voice that had the power to galvanize Martha to quick action. With one bound she was down the stairs. The next instant she flung herself straight into the midst of the little circle standing in the sitting-room.

"Oh, Mr. Demy, you've come! *You've come!*"

But at once she stepped back, abashed, to stare uncertainly at the tall, correctly dressed man she had embraced. *Was* it Mr. Demy? He was smiling at her. No one but Mr. Demy smiled like that. But why was he here with Dr. Wade—instead of the new doctor from New York?

Mr. Demy caught her two hands in his and shook them warmly. "Of course I have come."

And then Martha remembered father. She felt his eyes upon her. She started to speak and faltered. Father was looking in bewilderment from her to Mr. Demy.

"What is this? Where has my daughter met

you?" Recognition came slowly and with it a great anger. "Are you—are you—" He stepped close to the other, towered over him. He was inarticulate with rage. He shook his clenched hand at Dr. Wade, who was staring at them all as though he thought them bereft of their senses. "Is this a joke?" he cried, his voice rumbling like thunder.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Dr. Wade retorted.

Then Mr. Demy laughed. "I'm afraid I owe you all an explanation. Mr. Bradshaw and I have met under circumstances other than these. He knew me as a suspicious stranger who went by the name of Demy Wanders. Quite naturally he is surprised to find that I am really Dr. Demetrius Rasin. You've heard, perhaps, Wade, of my frequent disappearances from New York. Willa, my little daughter, and I go gypsying. It is only by taking her away and having her alone with me in the open that I can keep her strong. And you can understand, too, that in order to obtain the seclusion I want it is necessary to keep my identity a secret. Willa and I have learned to make a little play of that. Last summer we came to this valley. But the good citizens of the village resented our desire for privacy. A situation arose that sharpened their suspicions to active hostility. They gave me my choice between explaining my identity or going away. It appealed to my sense of humor to take the latter course. I went away with no grudge against these folk who were only doing their duty as they saw

it. I did regret keenly, though, leaving my two good friends, little Miss-of-the-Woods and her brother." He turned to Amariah, his face grave. "It's only the boy's need that has brought me back. I would come far, I would risk your anger, Mr. Bradshaw, to help him. And I'll confess to you that I have regretted many times that I did not give you the simple explanation of my living in your midst, for I have felt since that I owed it to you because you were their father and they trusted me." He said it simply, and he held out his hand to Amariah Bradshaw.

But Amariah did not notice the proffered hand. His own were opening and shutting with that gesture Martha knew so well; his face was working with his inward struggle of feeling. Mr. Demy turned to Dr. Wade.

"Where is the boy? I suggest that we see him at once—and talk afterwards. And may I go in to him alone?"

"I'll take you to him," cried Martha, seizing his hand. She forgot father, Dr. Wade, Aunt Judith and Amandy and Rachel staring through the door. She wanted only to take Mr. Demy quickly to Blair. "Oh, he's wanted you so much," she whispered, as they paused a moment outside of Blair's door.

After the door closed behind Mr. Demy she stood still, listening. She heard Mr. Demy call Blair's name and heard Blair cry out in answer, a glad incredulous cry that broke on a high note. Then she fled past Dr. Wade slowly mounting the stairs, down to the

sitting-room. Aunt Judith and Amandy and Rachel had retreated to the kitchen where they were talking over the dramatic return of the "stranger." Father stood in the window. Martha could not see his face. She could not tell whether or not he was still angry. She ran to him and put her hand into his. He did not notice her but he did not shake off her hold and she stood close to him, unafraid, waiting, her own heart echoing the sheer joy of that glad tone in Blair's voice.

In the kitchen Amandy rattled dishes and talked in a shrill, excited voice. The clock on the mantel ticked loudly. Outside in the cherry tree a bird sang. Dickens came in and thrust his cold muzzle into Martha's hand. "He knows," Martha thought.

At last she heard Blair's door open, and heard Mr. Demy's dear voice. Presently the two came into the living-room. And Amariah Bradshaw turned from his post and lifted heavy, anxious, asking eyes to Dr. Rasin's face.

Dr. Rasin put one hand on the father's shoulder and with the other lifted Martha's face. "I do not like to see your pansy-face so serious. Smile, child. Didn't you hear the boy laugh?"

"Oh, Mr. Demy, you can make him well!" But she did not ask it. She knew it. Of course Mr. Demy could.

"I believe I can make him well," Dr. Rasin answered slowly. He was looking at Amariah Bradshaw. "His case has been aggravated by his mental condition—he hasn't done his part in the fight-

ing." He hesitated. "I remember the boy had some rather big ambitions."

"He was going to be a doctor—like you are," Martha broke in. She had to say it—perhaps father couldn't. "He was going to begin studying for the Harvard exams, you see, when—it—happened."

Dr. Rasin nodded. He did not say anything for a minute. His eyes were still on the father's face. He read on it the signs of inner conflict and he waited, wisely. And Martha watched them both.

At last Dr. Rasin spoke. "Before we can expect improvement we must help Blair to get a grip on himself. Mr. Bradshaw, will you let me take the boy away with me? I want him for several months. I left Willa in a cottage down on the Sound. We'll take the boy into our household there. The sea air, and a new environment, new interests will get him out of himself. And I dare to predict that when he is stronger physically and mentally—he will recover his sight."

Martha drew a sharp frightened breath. She looked at father. What would father do? Oh, he must let Blair go! She tried to speak, to beg father to let Blair go, and found that her trembling lips could make no sound.

She saw her father's face darken. Sharply she recalled what he had said to her and Blair of Mr. Demy. "You say he is not a thief?" Father had meant then that Mr. Demy was stealing Blair away from him. He had refused only a little while ago to shake Mr. Demy's hand. Oh, he'd never let Blair go,

now, to spend months away from Twin Farms—with Mr. Demy.

Then Martha saw her father's great shoulders sag as though suddenly he were very tired, she saw the anger fade from his eyes, leaving them infinitely sad. Father looked like an old, old man. She slipped an arm about his neck and put her lips close to his ear. "Let Blair go. I'll stay with you, father, forever and ever."

Across the black head that lay against his coarse work shirt Amariah Bradshaw's eyes met Mr. Demy's, met them squarely.

"You may have the boy," he answered slowly, his voice harsh with emotion. And then he turned away as though he could not say more.

CHAPTER XXII

DICKENS HAS A "SIGN"

AFTER father said, "You may have the boy," there was so much to be done that Martha had no moment to realize what it meant. She and Rachel gathered together Blair's clothes; Aunt Judith packed them in the big telescope bag. Amandy flew around upstairs and down, in everyone's way. In the sitting-room Dr. Rasin and Dr. Wade were talking together. Now and then Martha stopped half-way between closet and bureau to catch a tone of Mr. Demy's voice.

From that moment Mr. Demy crossed the threshold of his room Blair had been more like his old self; he talked volubly with the girls, ordering them about. He felt his way to the window and stood there looking out as though he could see the familiar scene it framed. Martha noticed with a little throb of pride the square set of his shoulders. Oh, Blair would fight, now! Mr. Demy would teach him to "face front."

The big suit-case packed to bursting Rachel and Martha tugged it downstairs. Aunt Judith and Blair followed them. Amandy appeared with some cookies wrapped in an end of paper and a rosy apple. No one smiled at her offering for there were tears in her eyes as she pressed it on Blair. "Jest you put them in your pocket. Like as not you'll want a little snack before you get to New York."

Father helped Blair into the automobile. He did not say anything but Martha saw his lips twitching and noticed how his hands lingered on Blair's shoulder. When Mr. Demy turned to father and said gravely: "If I bring the boy back to you well and strong I shall hold it the happiest day of my life," father did not answer. But now he held out his hand to Mr. Demy and Mr. Demy gripped it.

They, father, Aunt Judith, Rachel, Martha and Amandy, stood in a little circle and waved until a bend in the road took the car out of sight. They stood there for a long moment, staring down into the valley and no one said a word.

Rachel spoke first. "Well, he's gone." And there was a little sigh in her voice.

"This ain't gettin' supper! Blair gone or not gone, folks've got to eat, I expect," and Amandy turned abruptly to the kitchen.

Father started for the barn. Martha wanted to stay close to him, but when she ran a step after him he bade her go back.

"Go back, Mart." His heavy voice shut her away from him. He wanted to be alone.

Left standing there she felt her heart contract with a great stab of pain. Blair was gone!

"I'm *not* going to cry," she said fiercely, blinking very fast. "Cry—when Blair's gone to get well! When he's gone with Mr. Demy!" She turned and fled into the house to the others. Amandy was briskly preparing supper, her tongue moving faster than her

hands or feet. Now Martha found comfort in Amandy's garrulity.

In all likelihood Amandy would talk to her dying day of this afternoon. Loud was her scorn for the stupidness of Emory Ross in particular and Greenbury in general in not recognizing at once that the stranger who had camped at the Hermit's Cabin was a gentleman! "I could of told them all he was somebody," she declared loftily as she diced cold potatoes into a skillet. "Emory Ross don't know enough to come in out of the rain. Accusin' a nice-speakin' man like that new doctor of Blair's of stealin'!"

Martha herself could not resist boasting to Nelly Howe about Mr. Demy who had turned out to be a wonderful doctor who accomplished cures that were just short of miracles. Now she could tell Nelly Howe all about her and Blair's friendship with Willa and Mr. Demy, about the little house on wheels. She might have found sweet satisfaction in seeing Nelly's eyes widen with interest and envy if she had not been so intent upon making Nelly know just how nice Willa was. She described dramatically the scene in the room over Cross' store when rank injustice had been meted to poor Mr. Demy. And then she told in every detail of his coming back with Dr. Wade.

"He lived in Prague until the war. That's in Czecho-Slovakia. I found it on the map last night. It's way in a corner. And Aunt Judith heard him tell Dr. Wade how he could not bear to go back there after the war because Willa's mother had gone out

with the army as a nurse and had died of a fever. Rachel thinks he must be very rich, for he only works when some special case comes to his attention and the rest of the time he travels with Willa. They've been everywhere."

"I think you were a pig to keep her to yourself," declared Nelly bluntly. "Was she awfully pretty?" Nelly could not hear enough of this story-book girl and Martha could not talk enough about her now that she was free to talk and had an eager listener.

Martha had little time to miss Blair. Sometimes she went to his room and looked in at its emptiness and went away with a little lump in her throat but too many other things claimed her attention to permit doing even this very often. Letters came to her almost every day from Willa, written for Blair, telling what they were doing. Martha shared these with the others but after she had read them aloud she put them in a little pile on the table in her own room to reread by herself. Blair was happy, they all knew that. One day Willa wrote that he had gone in swimming with her and Mr. Demy, another time he had gone sailing. He sat on the beach for hours while Mr. Demy read to him. Mr. Demy had taken him into New York to hear a concert. Martha, poring over the letters, could put herself with Blair and Willa by the merest trick of the imagination; she felt no envy for either of them for she so nearly shared their fun.

She wrote almost daily to Blair. She wrote in her own room where she kept Rachel's writing materials.

(Rachel did not need them now.) The letters were for Willa, too. She wrote of every little happening at Twin Farms and in the village. Sometimes she wished something very exciting would happen so that she could cover more paper.

Blair had been gone three weeks when something happened so exciting that Martha sat far into the night writing to Blair about it. She sat curled on her bed, a pad of paper balanced against her knees, Rachel's fountain pen dripping ink across her nightdress. She had so much to write that she had to stop now and then to rest her cramped fingers.

"Blair, we know who stole Peter Myer's money from the post-office last summer," she had begun.

"I'm telling you wrong end to, though. I must begin at the beginning. That was last night. Dickens woke me up barking. You know I told you that he sleeps in my room now. And he still misses you, Blair. He goes into your room every night and I have to go and get him and bring him in here. And he always whimpers a little. And then I tell him where you are and the grand time you're having and he understands exactly. Well, he woke me up barking. And he pulled at the bedclothes. He was awfully excited. He kept running to the window. I got up for I knew something was the matter. And father had heard him and he was up, too. He looked so funny with his pants pulled on over his nightshirt. Dickens jumped at his hand and then tore down the stairs and father and I ran after him, me in my nightdress. Of

course father thought there was someone around the barns. And we went out. And, Blair, the lock on the barn door had been broken again. Father opened the door and we both smelt smoke. The barn was on fire! 'Get Jerry up, Mart,' father said quick as a flash. 'Call Freeman Miles.' So I ran back for Jerry, but Jerry was up. He'd heard Dickens, too. And so was everyone else. I grabbed up Aunt Judith's shawl and I went as fast as ever I could over to the Miles's. Well, the barn didn't burn for it didn't get a good start and they all worked like mad and put the fire out, but it nearly did. It would have if Dickens hadn't barked when he did. And that isn't all that happened last night. This morning first thing after breakfast father went to the village to tell the sheriff about the fire and I went down as soon as ever I could, for I was terribly excited. And there was the biggest crowd you ever saw in Greenbury around the post-office. And right in the middle of the crowd was father and the sheriff and who do you think, Blair? Zach Stanney. Everyone was talking to everyone else and father was talking to the sheriff and the sheriff was putting Zach Stanney into his Ford and father got in, too, and they all rode away and everyone yelled after them. I saw Ted and I asked him what it was all about. And he told me that Cyrus Baggs had caught Zach Stanney trying to rob the post-office last night. Cyrus had missed the last train from Middletown and had walked home and he saw a light in the post-office and he'd

peeked in and saw Zach Stanney. And Ted said father thought likely Zach had been the one who had tried to burn the barn and he was going to find out. And he did find out, Blair, for Zach confessed. He was awfully mad about the way father closed up his place here and made him get out of Greenbury and he'd sworn to get even. And he said he had been the one who stole the money last summer. And he had tried to fire the barn last summer, too, but he hadn't done it. Isn't that exciting? Everyone is talking about it. You should hear Amandy. She says that *she'd* guessed all along it was Zach Stanney's work. But oh, Blair, I'm so happy that everyone here knows now that Mr. Demy didn't do that awful thing, aren't you? And now I've got to go to bed because my candle is almost out and Aunt Judith says she'll make me buy my own candles if I don't stop burning them to all hours of the night writing to you. But I can write better at night because you don't seem so far away when it is dark. Give my best love to Willa and my next best to Mr. Demy and keep my very, very best for yourself.

"Your sister,

"MARTHA.

"P. S.—Amandy said tonight that she guessed Dickens had a 'sign.' But we do not believe in signs, do we, Blair?

"P. S.—Oh, I almost forgot to tell you. I am sure Rachel is in love with Jamie. Night before last Jamie brought her home from a social at Eliza Tucker's and

they stood outside in the dark ever so long and I was in the kitchen getting a cookie and they didn't know it and *Jamie kissed Rachel.* Don't you think they'll get married now?

"P. S.—I'm so glad, glad, glad you're getting better. Blair, do you remember how we used to wonder what Mr. Demy did with his beautiful hands? And now we know."

CHAPTER XXIII

ANOTHER LETTER AND ANOTHER PROMISE

"MARTHA, wait, I want to tell you something," Rachel called to Martha. She had come in from the garden and her arms were full of flowers, red and purple asters and coppery zinnias. A color richer than that of the flowers was dying the soft tan of her smooth cheeks. "I want to tell you first, Mart."

Martha knew what she was going to tell her. Hadn't she been watching Rachel for days, watching her, not with the old anxiety but with a breathless *waiting* for Rachel to tell her this something? She shivered with the sheer joy of Rachel wanting to tell her first.

"I am going to marry Jamie Allan."

Rachel said it quietly, evenly; only the glow in her eyes betrayed how great was her happiness. This happiness of Rachel's was something beyond Martha's understanding. Before it she stood silent, awed. She threw her arms around Rachel's neck and clung to her. And Rachel held her close.

"Mart, I—I didn't know—anyone—could be as happy as I am," she whispered. Martha caught the quick lift of Rachel's breath and felt it spend itself in a little contented sigh.

"I wish I didn't have to tell anyone else," Rachel went on. "I'd like to keep it a secret for a while. It's

so sweet just to think about it. And I'll hate the bother of everyone asking questions. Oh, you don't know how wonderful Jamie is. There never was anyone like him. I hope some day, Mart, you will find someone *almost* like him."

Martha straightened. "I'm never going to marry anyone," she explained promptly, to relieve Rachel's fear that she might not find anyone even almost as nice as Jamie. "I'm going to live here at Twin Farms all my life and be an old maid."

"Silly! You don't know now what you're going to do but I'll bet anything it won't be *that!*"

Martha did not bother to argue this. Rachel's own affairs were infinitely more important. She wanted to ask a great many questions. But Rachel was not inclined to explain anything beyond the all-great fact that she and Jamie were to marry.

"Of course, I'll tell Aunt Judith to-night. Jamie is going to see father to-day."

Martha wished, too, that Rachel could keep her secret for a little while. It would be such fun knowing it herself, knowing it and watching Rachel and Jamie. She felt that she could take to herself the credit for Rachel's happiness. Hadn't she wished violently for just this that had happened? She felt an immense contentment. No longer need she worry over Rachel's future. It stretched ahead as sunny as a summer afternoon.

Rachel told the others that evening. She stood next to father with her hand slipped through his arm and

said quietly, evenly, as she had said to Martha: "I am going to marry Jamie Allan." There was something so sure about her happiness that even Amandy could not say anything for a moment.

Afterwards, after Jamie had come and been congratulated all around and with a fine air of possession had carried Rachel off with him, she gave voice to her satisfaction.

"Rachel could look a lot further and not pick up with anyone who'd be a better provider. I knew it was in the air. The Scotch get what they want and he's been wantin' a Bradshaw girl ever sence he got out of knee pants. Like as not he reckons that by waitin' he got the pick of the garden. Well, Rachel's pretty but it's Mart here who's the handy one 'round a house. Do you suppose, Mis' Judith, Amariah will give her a big weddin'?"

A wedding! Martha's spirit rose to the word. She saw Rachel a lovely bride in shimmering white and sweeping veiling, the old house gay, Molly and Joan and their husbands and Roger and Dick home and Blair— She hoped father would say Rachel could have a wedding. Perhaps she would be Rachel's bridesmaid. And Rachel would go away on a wedding trip and come back to the little house Jamie had talked of building and it would be such fun helping her settle all the new things, dropping in at odd hours to see her, eating meals there.

But Rachel did not intend to think of a wedding for weeks and weeks. She did not want anyone to

talk about it yet. Gradually it came out that Jamie was making new plans. He was not going to build the bungalow on his father's farm and develop the truck garden. He was going to buy an interest in a florist shop in Burlington and it would be a long time before they could afford to get married.

"That's Rachel's doin's," Amandy charged, in high disapproval. Amandy felt cheated. Martha felt cheated, too. Father only said that he thought Jamie would see his mistake, but sharp disappointment edged his voice.

"I guess, Mis' Judith, mebbe you and me and Amariah'll live out our days on the farm alone," Amandy declared prophetically.

It puzzled Martha that Rachel was not different in her new estate. She had had to write to Blair and Willa that Rachel was just the same. The only change was that now Jamie had a place in the household; he came in at all hours of the day, like one of the boys. Once more Amandy had someone for whom to save the biggest piece of pie. Now she was cooking the things Jamie liked. When he came striding into the big kitchen, his red hair shining, his nice gray eyes searching for Rachel, Amandy always was the first to ask him if he wouldn't stay to supper.

Rachel went her way so tranquilly that in a little while it seemed to Martha as though she had been engaged all her life.

Once more the family hung on word from Blair. Dr. Rasin had taken him and Willa and 'Lisa back to

New York. They were living in an apartment high over the city from the windows of which, Willa wrote, the people on the street looked like dwarfs. Blair walked every day with Willa and 'Lisa. To father Mr. Demy wrote that Blair was much stronger, physically, that his mental attitude was better. "He is learning to fight. I believe the battle is almost won." At the bottom of this letter Blair himself had scrawled: "Never felt better in my life. One of these days you'll have me back home again." The words zig-zagged over the sheet but it was Blair's handwriting and Martha kissed it. "Blair home!"

"That means they're lettin' him get well on the sly," Amandy declared with a measure of indignation. Amandy was looking forward to a dramatic moment in Blair's recovery in which she could share.

Her fears were justified. A week later father came into the house, sat down abruptly in the nearest chair and dropped his head in his hands.

"It's over," he muttered between his fingers. "It's over—and—thank God—Blair—will see." A solemn hush fell on those in the room. Martha was the first to speak.

Amariah explained that he had talked several times with Dr. Rasin over the telephone in Cross' store. Once he had talked to Blair himself. And this morning Stewie Cross had come after him, running all the way, to take him back to the store to the telephone. It was Dr. Rasin on the wire to say that he had removed the shade from Blair's eyes and that Blair

could see. The tears ran down Amariah Bradshaw's cheeks as he repeated the words of the message.

Martha found that she was crying, too, which startled her, for she really was feeling like laughing. She asked a great many questions to which no one paid any attention, for Rachel and Aunt Judith and Amandy were all asking questions themselves. So she ran to her room to write to Blair. But with Rachel's pen in her hand and the blank paper before her she could not write for the singing in her heart.

Blair well! At Twin Farms they talked of nothing else. The neighbors passed on the word from one to another. The whole valley sang it. Blair well. Blair will come home, the strong-limbed happy boy they had always known, the old Blair, not that brooding figure huddling in safe out-of-the-way corners.

To Blair's homecoming Martha looked forward with a veritable hunger. It was as though Blair were returning from some far-off land where he had been journeying for years. That he would come at once she had no doubt; he had written in those scraggling letters that one of these days they'd have him back.

Each day after that Martha wondered if Blair might not surprise them on this day. Amandy shared her hopes and cooked accordingly, until her pantry shelves groaned with goodies. Aunt Judith and Rachel cleaned Blair's room, aired his bedclothing, washed and rehung the muslin curtains at the windows, rearranged the boyish belongings with tender fingers.

October was gilding the valley. The stubble in the fields shone like bronze and the hillsides flamed with

scarlet. Martha, coming out of the house with Dickens at her heels, stood stock still a moment, held by the goodness of the morning. Oh, if only Blair would come to-day! He must come—she wanted him so. If he came to-day he would find that the hills were honoring him with their gayest mantles, that the birches and poplars were strewing carpets of gold for his home-coming feet to tread. She laughed softly at the fancy. It was just such a fancy as Willa might have taught her. Perhaps Willa had taught Blair to feel such whimsies. Oh, if he would come to-day with his well eyes he would see Twin Farms so beautiful! There were still flowers in the garden, blooming in a gaudy gay defiance of the autumn chill, golden rod and wild aster in the corners of the rail fences; the sumach down in the swale below the south meadow was a great pool of blood. The cornshocks stood like old sentinels in the rust-red stubble, here and there among them lay orange moons of pumpkins. The straw stacks beyond the barns gleamed like domes of washed yellow. Oh, it was all so fair! And over everything the cool deep canopy of blue October sky. The smell of October filled the air, a dozen odors all in one heady fragrance, odor of burning leaves, of the winey sweetness of vineyard and orchard, the cleanness of fresh-cut wood, of stewing peaches from the kitchen, of clean stables and bursting fodder bins. Martha, her head back, sniffed it with a new delight.

"A kingdom!" She remembered Mrs. Phillips' light words. A kingdom, and hers. Hers and Blair's, to share. She felt a thrill of possession.

A whistle in the valley roused her sharply from her musing. It was the eleven o'clock train. A ribbon of gray smoke marked its winding journey. Perhaps Blair—

But Blair was not on it. It brought a letter, however, which Amariah Bradshaw put into Martha's hands when he came in for dinner.

"Read it, girl," he said in his heavy voice. "It's from Dr. Rasin but it concerns you."

Martha held the envelope unopened in her hand. It came to her all at once what a significant part in life letters played. A while ago Rachel had waited, all rosy and palpitating, for Con's letters, then the all-wonderful letter from Mrs. Phillips, Willa's letters and Mr. Demy's, and now this—

"Read it," her father said again.

". . . I think it best to keep Blair with me through the winter, if you approve." "Oh!" cried Martha, in sharp disappointment. "I am asking this for the boy's good. I believe in time he will entirely recover his eyesight, but for awhile it is important to watch him, to guard against overstrain. He is impatient and too ambitious . . . And we want you to send Martha down to spend the winter with us. We think she will act as a tonic for Blair and she will discipline him. And she will do Willa a world of good. My little girl has few chums and none whom she enjoys as she enjoyed Martha during our stay in Greenbury. Martha can study with Willa under Miss Meredith, who is a very splendidly equipped teacher and later—with your permission—I will take them all down into Florida

where I have leased the use of a houseboat for three months . . ."

Martha sat dumb with unbelief. This couldn't be true. She must have read it all wrong. Mr. Demy didn't mean her—Mart Bradshaw.

Rachel caught the letter from her hand and read it impatiently. "Why that's the most wonderful luck I ever heard of!" Something of the old envy was in Rachel's tone.

Aunt Judith came in and read the letter and then Amandy. "Florida—ain't that where there're alligators?" Aunt Judith began to talk about clothes. Rachel was checking off the benefits of travel.

"But maybe I'm not going," protested Martha, childishly, her eyes on her father's face.

He felt their asking. "Do you want to go, Mart?"

At that she looked away, lest she see in father's eyes the hurt she sensed in his voice. Rachel answered for her, briskly. "Why, of course she wants to go. Who wouldn't? It would be wicked to miss such a chance. I'd go in a minute—I'd even leave Jamie, at least long enough to see New York."

Father looked over the room. "We're all here. We'll have a meeting on this; we'll have it now."

They had not had a family meeting since Blair's accident. And now it seemed scarcely necessary. Rachel had spoken. Amandy declared at once that the child ought to go. "'Twan't like she was goin' to be with strangers." Aunt Judith was calculating how they could get 'Liza Tucker, maybe, to come in and make Martha a new dress and her school dress was as

good as new. The voice of the majority was speaking already. Amariah Bradshaw bowed to it. Martha accepted it in a daze of bewilderment.

There followed a week of frenzied preparation, Martha and Rachel shopped in Middletown after school hours, Aunt Judith and 'Liza Tucker strewed ends of cloth and pins and thread over the sitting-room floor, Amandy washed and pressed. However, of them all, excepting perhaps father, Martha was the least excited.

"I just can't believe it. I won't believe it until I'm on a train, moving. No, I won't believe it until I get off the train and hug Blair," she added.

When Rachel lamented that Martha's clothes looked like "duds" and Martha answered indifferently, "Oh, they're all right," Rachel turned on her and charged her with not appreciating her good fortune. "Why, anyone most would think you didn't *want* to go!" And Martha did not protest that. There was no use trying to tell Rachel that part of her did not want to go, that part of her wanted to stay home with father.

Father had bought for her a new little trunk and when finally her belongings, her clothes and books and odds and ends of possessions were neatly packed in it, Martha had a sense of separation from the things she knew, as though the train already were bearing her away. She had a wild desire to empty the shiny trunk of its contents, to put them back in their old places, to hang away the new dresses. So strong grew the desire that she fled from it.

She saw her father moving down through the orchard toward the stone boundary that separated Twin

Farms from Freeman Miles' acres. For a moment she watched the bulky figure, saw the droop of the heavy shoulders with a tug at her heart. He looked so alone. She ran after him, caught up with him and put her arm through his. She could not say anything for a lump in her throat. He did not speak either, but he pressed her hand tight against him.

They stood against the lichen-covered stones. Father stared out across the acres he long had coveted. Martha thought he was thinking of his old plans. She hoped he was.

"When are you going to buy them, father?" she asked.

He started. "Buy them? Why should I buy them?" His voice was dull, in his eyes gleamed the hurt that Martha dreaded. "Why should I buy them? Nobody wants them—after me." He lifted his great hand, hard-muscled, stubby with labor, looked at it as he would look at a worn tool, dropped it upon the stone. "I have worked hard—I have loved the soil, I have put dreams into it. But what's the use? I've built only for myself, after all."

Amazement mingled with compassion in Martha's breast. She had never heard father talk like this before. He had forgotten her, his brooding eyes were fixed on the hills.

"None but a Bradshaw has tilled these fields! And when I am gone—" He shook his head sorrowfully.

Martha looked at him shyly. She was tongue-tied before his unwonted display of emotion. In the dim

twilight he looked more a giant of a man, an old giant, to her wrought-up mind he looked even like a king, a king sorrowing that his beloved lands must some day pass into alien hands. She felt very young and helpless. Her heart went out to him in longing, a longing to tell him that she, Martha Bradshaw, loved the hills of Twin Farms as he loved them, as Noah Bradshaw had loved them, that she would come back to them and stay among them forever, but in the confusion of her feeling she could not find the words.

Amariah must have felt her shiver. He looked down at her suddenly.

"You'll catch cold, Mart, out here without a coat," he said quickly. He was father again. "We'll go back."

In bed Martha could not sleep, not so much for the excitement of what the next day held for her but for thinking of father, thinking how queer and sad and different he had been that moment as they stood by the wall. Suddenly she sprang from her bed, lighted her candle. She climbed on to a chair and removed the lid from the old stove-pipe hole and took down her tin box. She spread her promises out on the table. Funny childish scribblings, she read them one by one, then tore them into tiny pieces. The one concerning her "power" she held for a long time before she tore it up. "Thank goodness I can tear *that* up," she said aloud, vehemently. It was so comforting to know that she did *not* have any disturbing inner occultism. And yet she had "wished" Jamie's and Rachel's happiness for them! Perhaps *anyone* could "wish" happiness

for someone else, even for one's self, something as beautiful as happiness—

But habit was strong. She would write one more promise. She spread out a fresh sheet of paper. She smiled tenderly as she took up a pencil.

"I am going away now but I promise to come back to Twin Farms, and I will always love it more than any other place on earth and I will live here all my life with father."

She signed her name through a sudden rush of tears.

She put the box back and covered it with the old tin lid. Then she blew out her candle and went to bed. It made her feel better to have written the promise, childish though it was.

Yet gradually a doubt crept into her comfort. How did she know what the future held for her? She heard Rachel's: "Silly! How do you know what you'll do? I'll bet anything it won't be *that!*" And once Blair had said to her: "Maybe you're intended for some high Destiny, but wait 'til it comes."

She could make out the square of her trunk, all packed, waiting. Her little room, stripped of her small possessions already looked bare, empty, as Blair's room had looked. To-morrow the morning train would take her away, for months and months. Destiny already might be bearing her ahead.

"But I *will* come back," she cried, defying the phantom Destiny that threatened her resolve. She pulled the bedclothes up to her chin and shut her eyes stubbornly on her disturbing thoughts.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE HOMECOMING

"IF ANYONE was to ask me I'd say Amariah Bradshaw'd took leave of his senses," grumbled Amandy, dropping into a kitchen chair and mopping her face with her apron. An end of faded calico was tied about her sparse hair, turban fashion. This and the long apron caught at her waist with a string were her regimentals for housecleaning. She donned the turban as a soldier would belt his sword, donned it and wore it until the battle was over. In the old days Blair often had charged her with sleeping in it.

Spring housecleaning in this New England home was a solemn service. No corner, from roof to vegetable bin, was overlooked. The attic groaned with a burden of cast-offs, boxes of papers and pictures, old books, broken furniture, horse-hair trunks filled with old clothing, and each spring Aunt Judith and Amandy religiously aired all of these and packed them away again. Uncomplainingly they walked up and down the narrow dark stairs that led to the dim attic space, the murmur of their voices running above the creaking of the boards under their tread. To throw away even the dingy plush photograph frames, or the lilac silk that Amariah's mother had worn when she was married, in ribbons now, would have been a sin in their eyes. There was always the possibility that something or

other in this accumulation of days long past might be "handy." Memories crowded in upon them as they worked, when they touched Roger's baby dresses, Joan's first primer, the flowers from Amariah's little sister's grave that Aunt Judith had waxed herself, Martha's mother's wedding slippers.

Every carpet on the floors below had to come up. Amandy knelt for hours at a time drawing tacks. The ponderous beds were stripped to the slats, the furniture was moved from one room to another. Truly Amandy could say that no speck of dust escaped *her*.

Not until every part of the house was redolent of strong home-made soap did the fray end. And if Amandy could boast that they'd finished the "cleanin'" up at Twin Farms before 'Liza Tucker had so much as begun, she had all the reward she asked. She was as proud of the cricks in her back and the blisters on her hands and her aching feet as a soldier of his wounds. She grumbled a little more than usual over the steps she was taking, but the gleam in her eyes was the gleam of a war-horse scenting gunpowder.

For forty-five years Amandy had cleaned house at Twin Farms but never in her long service had she seen the "doin's" that led her to assert now that Amariah Bradshaw had "took leave of his senses."

At his bidding carpenters had come from Middletown and laid hardwood floors in bedrooms and living-rooms. Amandy could estimate to the inch how much good carpeting had been discarded. She held it outrageous. That the carpeting was being made into rugs

did not appease her—the familiar designs of pattern would be lost in the dull drab dye that Rachel had chosen. Amandy mourned the old carpets as she would have mourned for old friends. Electricians came and wired the house for electric lights. Amariah Bradshaw had paid to have a feed wire strung up his road. She turned a deaf, aggrieved ear when Rachel reminded her that she would not have to clean the oil lamps any longer. And now Rachel and her father had come back from a visit to Molly in Northampton—the first Amariah had made—and had had sent after them new rugs for the living-room, strange wired lamps on slender wrought-iron pedestals, and a new piano. And that was not all—Rachel had persuaded her father to buy an automobile!

Amandy hinted darkly of the poor-house. If Amariah didn't land first in the crazy house he certainly was doomed to the charitable institution in Middletown. Rachel had led him around by the nose but he'd find when it was too late where he'd end up.

Amandy had a deeper grievance. Hitherto, Amariah always had been satisfied to leave the women folks alone with their cleaning, but now he literally drove them all. He left Jerry to do the ploughing while he stood over the carpenters and electricians and painters, urged her and Aunt Judith and Rachel into more speed in getting things to rights. And all because Blair and Martha were coming home!

No one was more keen to have the house ready for this homecoming than Amandy, deep in her heart. But

she held that the house as it had been was good enough for the children. Certainly it was what they had left. There was no sense in tearing everything up, especially things as good as new. Amandy had her own ideas as to Amariah's motives. "Does he think a lot o' new-fangled fixin's is goin' to keep them two on the farm after they've had a taste of the city?" she demanded scornfully of Aunt Judith and Rachel. Aunt Judith did not express any opinion one way or the other but Rachel did. She agreed with Amandy that even the new-fangled fixings would not keep Blair and Martha on the farm after the excitement of the winter. She said it wistfully. Rachel had shown frank envy as she read Martha's frequent letters, full of the wonders of New York, the tall buildings that made her neck crack looking up at them, and at night the myriad of lights like millions of yellow and white and blue and red fireflies dancing in funny squares and circles and triangles. Incoherently but vividly Martha had expressed her impressions of it all, the teeming life, the confusions, of Willa's home, twenty stories above the ground and yet a home, a flower garden on a bit of roof, rugs as soft as the grass outside of the kitchen door, of music, of theatres. And then Florida, sunshine and flowers in midwinter, palm trees, the sea. Poor Rachel had read of it all with pricks of longing in her heart. Oh, Mart would come home but she'd never be contented—even with the changes that had been made. It was silly to think she would.

Then came a letter from Blair saying that he and

Martha would get home a full week before they had planned to come. Dr. Rasin had changed his mind about stopping in a little out-of-the-way old hostel in the North Carolina mountains. (Amandy had calculated maybe "Mart might see the Governor's wife there, for wan't North Carolina a handy distance from Maryland?") After Blair's announcement Amandy and Aunt Judith tackled the last of the cleaning with redoubled frenzy; Amariah and Jerry measured and hung wall-paper, painted furniture; Rachel hemmed ruffles for the new curtains for Martha's room and sat far into the evening making lamp shades in a clever way she had learned from Molly on her last visit.

Rachel's and Jamie's plans had taken definite shape. They would be married early in September. Amariah had said she could have as much of a wedding as she wanted. Even Rachel sometimes wondered what had come over father. She intended going to Molly's and buying heaps of clothes, ready-made. She and Jamie were planning to take a little bungalow on the outskirts of Burlington and Jamie's father had said he would give them a parlor set for a wedding present. Rachel mentally determined to ask him for the money and buy the furniture herself. Her lip curled a little scornfully as she thought of the over-stuffed plushy sofa and chairs Jamie's father and mother probably would select, if left to themselves. When Aunt Judith suggested that she take the lace curtains that had lain packed in a box ever since Aunt Judith had broken up her home to come to Amariah's Rachel declined the gift, firmly.

She was going to make cretonne curtains, such as Molly had—yes, even for her living-room. She horrified Amandy's sense of the proprieties by saying that she and Jamie were going to paint the kitchen pink and buy a white enamel stove if it reduced them to living on bread and water for a time. Her plans were many but just now they took second place to her contemplation of Martha's and Blair's return.

"Of course the children will be changed," she said to them all. She did not see her father wince as she said it. Martha would be grown up now. Why she was seventeen! She'd look lots different. When Aunt Judith countered that Mart couldn't look much different on the money her father had sent her Rachel held to the point. It would not be so much a difference in clothes, though Rachel hoped Martha might have acquired something like style in her associations with Willa, it would be a more subtle change. She spoke of it so often that the others began to think it, too. Aunt Judith packed away Martha's last summer gingham dresses. They'd do for somebody, likely, but not for this Martha who was coming back. And Amandy said more than once, a little defiantly, that if "Mart's comin' home to stick up her nose at the way things is done, she'll find soon enough that she can't change things. City ways is all right for city folks, but Amandy Meegs isn't goin' to learn any new wrinkles at her age."

Rachel dressed very carefully to go to meet the homecomers in the new car. It was not a very big car

and had had other owners, but a fresh coat of paint and red wheels gave it an air that satisfied Rachel. Amariah went with her. He wore his black frock coat. Amandy had baked since daylight. When no one was looking she had gone out into the orchard and ruthlessly broken off branches of apple blossoms which she put in glass jars on the mantel in the living-room and on the new piano. She was a little startled at her impulse and excused it by declaring aloud that now the room didn't look so much like folks without some of their clothes on.

Others in the village were on the station platform waiting for the train that would bring Blair and Martha home, neighbors who gave to the Bradshaw children an affection almost like that they gave their own. Greenbury looked upon Blair's recovery as it would have looked upon a miracle; mixed with their genuine rejoicing that the boy was coming home well was a curiosity to see how he would act, how he would look.

Amariah Bradshaw stood a little apart from these others. He could not talk for the emotion that gripped him. And when the train pulled slowly in and the little crowd pressed forward he could not move. He saw everything in a thick blur. Dickens pressed against his knees. He could feel the dog trembling and he put his hand down on the shaggy head and his hand trembled, too.

Then suddenly Dickens gave a quick bark and plunged forward, almost knocking 'Liza Tucker flat.

It was Dickens who reached Blair first, leaping upon him with loud whimperings. And Blair, a tall, tanned, bare-headed Blair, with the stature of a man but the glad eyes of a boy, hugged the dog to him. Only for a moment, though. His eyes, his well eyes, caught sight of his father. "Father!" he cried.

But Martha had reached father first. Her arms were tight about his neck; she was clinging to him as though she would never let go. She let go, though, to give Blair a chance, and then she hugged Rachel. Then she hugged 'Liza Tucker. She started to hug Philomen Baggs and did kiss him. She was laughing and crying and trying to talk to everyone at once and finding that her voice came only in funny little excited gasps.

Finally Rachel tugged at her arm. "We can't stay here all day," she said, laughing, too, sharing Martha's excitement. The little crowd made way for them and Rachel led Martha to the shiny car.

"Climb in," she said, trying to make her tone casual.

Martha halted before the wonder of it. Then she squealed: "Is it ours?" Rachel nodded. And Martha who had so lately ridden in motors fit for kings reached out her hand and caressed the repainted metal.

"Why, it's the grandest car I ever saw! Look, Blair," she gasped.

It came to Rachel that this Martha riding by her side was *not* noticeably different. Her side glance took in Martha's appearance. She was wearing exactly the same clothes she had gone away in. The crop of black

hair was "doneup" in a girlish fashion and was neater, she was taller, too, so that her skirt and coat had a look of not belonging to her. But her enthusiasms were the same; she chattered volubly as Rachel sped the car over the road to Twin Farms, she sat forward in her seat in a sort of ecstasy of expectation, her eyes were shining, her pointed chin was thrust out in the old way.

Behind them Blair and his father rode in silence, Dickens on the floor at Blair's feet. Blair did not want to talk and his father could not. Blair's eyes were turning this way and that, picking out old landmarks with a hungry joy. One hand held his father's hand tightly.

At the farm Martha divided her transports between the new changes in the house and Amandy's pies. Amandy watched her run from one thing to another and back again to the kitchen with an immense relief. She didn't think Mart any different.

However, toward Blair Amandy felt shy. Blair *was* changed. He was handsomer, the grave lines were still about his mouth and he was quiet. His delight in being home again was genuine, but Amandy felt with a little pang that one knew just to watch him that he wasn't home for good. He had the detachment of Roger and Dick when they came home on a visit.

Martha thought the new lamps and the piano and rugs "just darling." "But I can't believe it's home," she cried, sitting gingerly on the edge of a reupholstered chair. "I sort of miss the old things."

"There," thought Amandy, looking an "I-told-you-so" at Amariah Bradshaw. Suddenly Martha exclaimed: "I know why you did it all! Rachel—it's for your wedding!"

No one contradicted her and Martha fell on Rachel demanding to know all her plans. And when was Jamie coming down to Greenbury? Martha declared she was wild to see him; all through the winter she hadn't seen anyone as nice as Jamie.

Neither Martha nor Blair talked of their own experiences, those golden experiences of which the others were eager to hear. For the moment Martha forgot them in the delight of being home. The recounting would come later, would take days and days to tell; now she wanted only to hug everyone again and again, to eat—goodness, her mouth had been watering for some of Amandy's raised biscuits, to feel the dear meadow grass under her feet, to run out to the barns and caress the gray mares, to kiss Prince's velvety nose.

"Come up and see your own room, Mart," father said.

Martha tucked her hand into her father's arm. It was so good to feel his great bulk beside her. And it was nice to have father for a minute all to herself. As she climbed the stairs she started to say: "I hope you haven't changed my room," but she checked the words. It was not likely they had—that would not be necessary for Rachel's wedding. She was glad it

wasn't. She wanted to find the little-girl room she had left.

At the door Amariah stood aside to let her enter. And on the threshold she stopped short. They *had* changed it! A little white enamel bed replaced the old walnut double bed. It made the room look larger. Where the table had stood was a desk, painted white, and over it some shelves for books. At the window was a little rocking chair. The curtains Rachel had made primly adorned the window frames and one of the rugs made out of the old carpeting half-covered the floor.

"Oh!" Martha cried, and her father did not know that the single exclamation came from a great disappointment.

"Jerry made the shelves and painted the furniture. Rachel and I bought it second hand over at Middletown."

Suddenly Martha turned to her father. "Father! You did everything—for Blair and me! Because we were coming home. Oh, father, you didn't have to—" She could not finish. She made a little rush to the window and looked out between the ruffled curtains. Nothing was changed out there—the cherry tree, the great elms pale green in their new leaves, the apple orchard a sea of pink bloom. She felt a rush of thankfulness that that was just as she had dreamed of it! And she couldn't tell father, after he'd gone to all this trouble and expense to please her, that it had been all the "old" things she had longed to see, longed often

in a great nostalgia of homesickness. She turned back to the room and noticed for the first time the fresh wall paper. It was splashed over with pink flowers as though the gay bloom outside had crept into the room. But she did not think of that then, her eyes lifted slowly to the old stove-pipe hole. It had been plastered over.

Her face reddened. And her glance went to her father's. He was smiling. She knew father had found her promise.

He drew his wallet from his pocket and took from among its papers the folded sheet Martha remembered. He opened it and spread it out for her gaze.

Martha tried to laugh but she couldn't. "I meant it, father," she said, in a low voice.

But he did not seem to hear her. "Sometimes promises are rash things to make, Mart." He slowly tore the paper to bits. "I guess Amandy must have dinner ready," he said, then, and he turned toward the door.

CHAPTER XXV

MARTHA'S KINGDOM

"WITH this ring I thee wed!"

Oh, how proudly Jamie had said it! He'd said it deliberately and he had held Rachel's hand tight for a moment before he went on to endow her with all his worldly goods. Martha had thrilled to the toes of the blue satin slippers peeping out from under the billows of blue chiffon that was her bridesmaid's dress. She had shivered delightfully at the instant's imagining that it was she who blushed there in bridal white and some other man as nice as Jamie—or nicer—was saying it to her.

Martha thought the entire wedding perfect in its every detail. Roger and Dick had come home for it. Joan had come and brought her adorable infant. Molly and her husband had come, and Mr. Demy and Willa. Martha rejoiced most for that. They had come three days before the day of the wedding, come in the little house on wheels. When Martha saw father and Mr. Demy sitting on the porch smoking and talking like old friends her contentment was complete.

Rachel had yielded to Martha's coaxing to be married out of doors. "It's so golden," Martha had pleaded. Blair and Jerry had framed a bower. Willa had hung it with pale gold leaves and great clusters of grapes. "Purple for wealth and gold for happiness,"

Mr. Demy had laughed. There were sprays of deep pink asters and cunning clusters of button chrysanthemums. And with her clever fingers Willa had made a trailing bridal bouquet of wild clematis for Rachel and another for Martha of every color the garden would yield. Within the house hung pleasant odors of baking, for Amandy had put her best effort into the preparation of the wedding feast. Joan's wedding had not been much in Amandy's eyes and Molly's nothing at all, but she intended that Rachel's should be remembered and talked about in the village for years to come.

"But it was all over so soon," mourned Martha after Rachel and Jamie had driven away in a shower of rice. "It took days and days to get ready for it and it only seemed to take a minute!" With a little sigh she patted down the soft folds of her own pretty dress. Then, Martha-like, she found quick consolation. "Only we've got lots to remember about it. *That* will last ever so long."

Amandy already had changed her best dress and put her feet into her old slippers and was gathering up the dishes. 'Liza Tucker had stayed to help her and Aunt Judith straighten things in the house. They were talking in low tones as they worked. They talked about how pretty Rachel had looked and what folks had worn and about the presents. And about Mr. Demy. "I like to split my best silk laughin' inside of me when Doctor Demy shook hands with Emory Ross. Emory went as red as though he was took with a fit. Thought he wouldn't come, mebbe, but I guess Sara Ross made

him. She wouldn't miss a weddin' or a fun'ral this side of Burlington." They talked of Roger and Dick's coming on and of Blair. "Did you see the way Blair looked at Willa?" asked Amandy with a knowing wink at 'Liza Tucker.

Martha slipped away. She did not like the literalness of the clearing up. She went to her room and took off the blue chiffon. She took it off slowly as though she were divesting herself of a ceremonial robe. She spread it out on the bed and looked at it with tender rapture. She'd keep that dress always—it meant so much. Years and years from now she would look at it and see again that little scene under the elms, Rachel so slender in her soft white, so wide-eyed, Jamie proud and smiling, Blair beside him. Jamie was dear but he wasn't as good looking as Blair—no one was. All the neighbors in a circle around them and Joan's little Nancy toddling from group to group. And father in his fine new coat!

"Did you see the way Blair looked at Willa?" Martha knew what Amandy had meant. Some day Blair might marry Willa. It was silly to think of it, Willa was only her age, but still, in the years to come, if Blair were to marry anybody (and Martha endured a sharp little pang at that thought) she'd rather it would be Willa. Willa, a real sister! She'd wish it for them, as she had wished Jamie for Rachel. Not soon, but after Blair was a doctor, like Mr. Demy, when Willa was older like Rachel. She'd keep the wish in her heart.

A little hush had fallen over the house, a sense of something gone. Roger and Dick had taken the afternoon train. Molly and Joan and the baby had gone down to the village. The last of the guests had said good-by and departed. Blair and Willa and Mr. Demy had walked over the wood road to Sunset Rest. But it was more than that—it was Rachel's going that left that sense of hush, the girl Rachel, pretty, domineering, restive daughter of Twin Farms! That girl Rachel had gone on into a new estate. She had arrayed herself in white and put her hand in Jamie's to go with him into their kingdom of happiness. Martha thought of her, going like that. It was thrilling, it was a little frightening. The thrill of it, the fright had been in Rachel's eyes as she lifted them to Jamie's face. Martha felt it, now. Perhaps that was why folks cried at weddings. Aunt Judith's eyes had been brimming to-day. And Martha had heard someone audibly sniffling behind her. She had thought it silly to cry when everything was so lovely, but now she understood. The tears were for the girl Rachel who was going. And that was why there was such a hush now over everything, why Aunt Judith and Amandy and 'Liza Tucker talked in low voices down in the kitchen, why she herself felt so queer and sad.

She hung away the blue gown, covering it carefully with an old sheet. Then she slipped a simple wash dress over her head. It made her feel more like her everyday self. She went downstairs and fell to helping the others. By keeping very busy she might forget that

little sadness about Rachel going. But she could not stop Amandy's tongue.

"Well, now Rachel's gone. Blair's goin' to school in Boston and 'taint likely he'll come back more'n long enough to say hullo like the other boys do. Dear me, time was when there wan't hardly room to step, the young ones were so thick 'round here. Mebbe we'd better shut up some of the rooms now, Mis' Judith. It'll save a lot of cleanin' and it won't seem so lonely."

Aunt Judith agreed with Amandy. 'Liza Tucker said it was a sensible idea. Martha shuddered. The dear big rooms shut—she hated the picture.

"I haven't gone yet, Amandy," she reminded her, from the cupboard where she was stacking the clean plates. Then she bit her lips in vexation. Why had she said it like that? Why, she was *never* going.

"You!" Amandy laughed. "With your fine city notions and friends no one's thinkin' *you'll* stay here on the farm!" Amandy said it proudly. She winked expressively at 'Liza Tucker. "Didn't I hear your pa just last night talkin' on the porch to the Doctor 'bout your going to school somewheres away with Willa this winter?"

Martha stood very still. Father had not said anything about it to *her*.

"What did father say?" she asked slowly.

"He said you could go if you wanted to. I s'pose he figures he might as well spend all the money he's set by—you're the last of the young ones and there'll always be enough off the farm to keep us old folks.

Prob'ly he'll tell you himself now the doin's are over here."

Martha hoped he would not tell her at once. She had to think about it. She escaped from the others as soon as she could. She went out into the orchard. She was trembling so with excitement that she had to sit down.

She remembered Mr. Demy talking with Willa about the merits of a school just outside of Washington. Mr. Demy had argued that Willa was outgrowing Miss Meredith, that she needed the associations of a school. Willa had rebelled at his suggestions. "I'd go if Martha could go, too," she had answered childishly. And Martha and Mr. Demy had laughed at her. Martha had looked over the catalogue with Willa. She had marvelled that Willa did not want to go. The vine-covered, Gothic arched old stone building had looked like a castle. The studies offered were those she herself would have at the Middletown High, but in addition there were horseback riding and hockey, dramatics, social etiquette. The "young ladies" were taught how to enter a ballroom!

Martha had told Willa she would like it, once she was there. There was a picture of the "young ladies" walking down the path from the great arched doorway. The girls looked very stylish in trim uniforms and tight little hats. She could see Willa walking with them, more stylish than any of them. She had not thought of herself there at all—until now. Amandy had said father had told Mr. Demy she could go.

Another whole winter with Willa! It was too good to believe. They'd room together in one of the rooms behind the mullioned windows. They'd study together as they had studied together last winter. Willa was quicker to learn than she but Willa was impatient and Miss Meredith often had told her she should take pattern by Martha's diligence. Martha wasn't quite sure what Miss Meredith meant but she'd try to make Willa be "diligent" in her work. And perhaps sometimes she and Willa could get away from the other "young ladies" and be just together, walking or sitting under those trees that were so beautiful in the catalogue.

She shut her eyes tight and tried to see herself there with Willa in that school. It was not easy; her imagination, always quick to do her bidding, failed her now. Suddenly she laughed. She had to laugh at thinking of her, Mart Bradshaw, learning to enter a ballroom properly!

After a little she sprang to her feet. She'd walk. She went over the meadow lane toward Dyett's pond. Her face was puckered in her confusion of thought. Oh, she wanted to go to school with Willa. No, she *didn't* want to go. She'd love it. But was she sure? It would be so long to stay away from her beloved hills! She lifted her perplexed face to the hills. They were shrouded in a sun-gilded haze through which the farther mountains showed purple. Oh, she loved them! She loved them more than any of the others did, except father. Sometimes, last winter, in New

York and in the South, she had longed for them with a longing that hurt.

Beyond Dyett's pond the meadow rose steeply to a knoll crowned with white birches. Now yellow leaves lay over it like a pale carpet. A faint wind whispered through the baring branches overhead. Martha climbed the knoll and stood under the trees. To steady herself she clung to one of the slender tree trunks.

This had been a favorite spot in years gone by. Often returning from berrying expeditions she and Blair had stopped here to rest under the trees, their loaded pails beside them. She had brought her dolls here many a time to play house. But she had not been here for months, years even.

Twin Farms lay before her, a picture fair to the eye with its rolling pasture lands, its acres harrowed for the winter sowing, its trim orchards and garden patches. The great elms half hid the irregular roof-line of the rambling house. A "mothering house," Mr. Demy once had called it. A spiral of smoke was curling upward from one of the chimneys.

Only sounds muted by distance broke the soft silence of the afternoon. Standing there Martha had a sudden curious sensation of detachment, of being apart from her world, even from her ownself, looking down upon it and upon herself, there. Her brain cleared of its confusion.

Perhaps the whispering wind could tell her of other Bradshaws who had come here and stood beneath the birches and regarded the fair lands that were their

heritage. None but a Bradshaw had tilled these fields. Father had said it so sadly. And now, one by one, the boys were going away, turning their backs upon their own. No wonder father grieved. Suddenly Martha stood very straight. Her eyes grew wide and sober. Why, of course she knew what she wanted to do! She knew what she would tell father when he spoke to her about going away to school with Willa. She laid her cheek against the white bark of a birch with a swift caressing movement. Then she walked resolutely down the slope, walked quickly homeward.

She hoped father would not tell her about going away to school before the others—even before Mr. Demy and Willa. It would be easier to make father understand if she were alone with him.

Much of the morning's gaiety came back to the household at supper-time. Martha helped Joan put the baby Nancy to bed and then they all sat out under the trees and watched the sunset and talked about the wedding. Every now and then Martha's heart missed a beat when she thought father or Mr. Demy might say something, but they didn't. Perhaps father hadn't decided she could go, perhaps Amandy had been mistaken.

It was nice sitting in a big circle under the trees. It was nice seeing Joan and Molly there and Blair stretched out on the grass with his hands clasped under his head. In a few days they would all be gone but to-night, with everyone laughing and talking, it was easy to shut that out of one's mind, to forget what

Amandy had said. Martha sat between Willa and Molly, her arms locked about her knees. No one noticed that she was quiet and that now and then her gaze wandered to the hills and grew wrapt, as though some serious thought persisted in intruding upon the lighter mood of the moment.

After a little, father walked down to the barns. Martha saw him go, watched the big bulk of his figure disappear through the barn door. Impulsively she sprang to her feet and ran after him.

"You, Mart?" he said when she joined him. He was concerned for one of the cows that was sick. "I'll have a vet over from Middletown to-morrow, I guess," he said aloud. "She's a fine beast."

"She's one of the Pontiac stock, isn't she, father?" Martha asked. With a conscious effort she kept her mind on the poor animal so as to crowd back those other thoughts. Her father glanced at her in a mild surprise that she remembered.

"Of course I remember. You bought her from the Great Valley Farms." Martha felt annoyed that father would think she had forgotten!

She followed him as he made his usual round of the barns. "I used to do this when I was a little girl," she thought, feeling very grown-up. "I'll do it often now." And she smiled as though at a secret.

As they started away from the barn her father put his hand on her arm.

"Just a moment, Mart. I want to talk to you. I guess this is a good time."

"He's going to tell me, now," Martha said to herself.

"Let's go through the orchard," she suggested. "They won't miss us. Oh, isn't it nice, father, to have so many here and to hear them all talking and laughing?"

Father did not answer. He did not say anything as they walked slowly through the orchard. When they came to the old stone wall they stood against it in silence.

"It's going to *hurt* father to tell me," Martha thought, compassionately. She could save him the hurt by speaking first but she did not want to. He'd only be hurt for a little while. She looked at him and saw his face set in sadness. And finally out of his absorption he said slowly: "Well, Rachel's gone and Blair's going. You'll go next, Mart."

"What do you mean, father?" He must say it all before she would speak.

"Dr. Rasin wants you should go to school with Willa this winter. He'll tell you more about it. I guess I can afford it."

"What did you tell him, father?" Her father well could mistake her breathlessness for eagerness.

"What could I tell him?" Amariah answered with clumsy helplessness.

"Shouldn't we have a meeting?" Martha demanded.

"Who's left? Aunt Judith likely would vote yes and Amandy, too. And you—"

"But I'll vote no," Martha broke in, softly.

"You'll—vote—no—what do you mean, Mart?" Her father's tone was unbelieving.

"Just what I say." Suddenly Martha clung to her father's arm. Words would not come easily for the trembling of her lips. And she had determined to be so calm! "I—I don't want to go away. I did, at first. You see I knew about it. Amandy told me. I'm glad she did. It gave me a chance to think about it. At first I was terribly excited. And then I began to see everything, to think ahead. It was funny, father, I *saw* myself, in years ahead. And I saw myself—here. Why, father, I *belong* here! *I* love Twin Farms—the way you do."

She stopped. She wanted to make father understand how much she loved it. But he must understand without words. Because she was so like father himself, inarticulate under strong feeling, it must be like this always between them.

She went on speaking slowly. "I had a glorious time last winter with Willa and Mr. Demy. It was terribly exciting and interesting, every minute, but it was like playing, and I always was thinking of coming home. And that school would be like that, too. I'd be like what Mrs. Phillips said—a misfit. I'd never really belong, not as I belong here." She hesitated. Her heart pounded so that she thought father must hear it. "Father, can't—can't—a—woman run a farm?"

Amariah Bradshaw stared down at her.

"Why, I don't know," he answered uncertainly.

" Del Carter's widow runs the Carter place on shares but she don't do much with it, I guess."

" Well, *I* know they can," and Martha nodded her head. " And that's what I'm going to do, father. I want to go to the state agricultural college and learn how to run a farm scientifically. I'm going to study raising cattle. Father, don't you think a girl could do it?" She turned to him, her eyes begging for his approval.

" I guess if any girl could, you could, Mart," he answered at last.

From where the others sat under the trees came the sound of laughter and the hum of voices. From the wide open windows of the old house gleamed lights, shaded, hospitable. The laughter, the voices, the lights warmed Martha to her heart core. Shut up part of the house, indeed!

Together she and her father walked back through the orchard. Martha's step, measured to her father's longer stride, had in it a new eagerness. Her small chin was outthrust, her eyes wide and earnest and aglow with happiness.

" Father," she said suddenly, " don't you think we'd better close that deal with Freeman Miles? You know, that fifty-acre piece? You see we'll need it for we're going to have the finest stock farm in Vermont."

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